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Marjorie
Lee



THE LION HOUSE

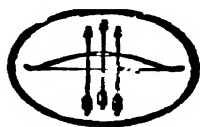
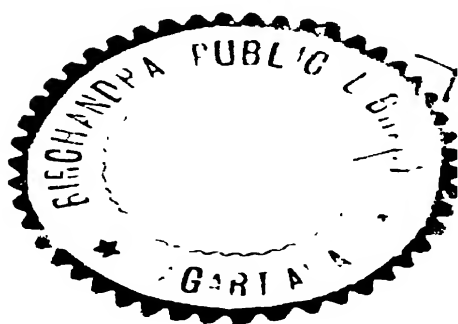
After meeting Frannie Browne at a party you would go home feeling that something had happened. If you were one of the more conventional mothers of her children's schoolmates, she would probably shock you. If you were another woman's husband you might well be more excited by her than you should be. If you happened to be another woman of Frannie's own kind—intelligent, sophisticated, witty, irreverent—you would be charmed and intrigued. Here, you would feel, is someone whose friendship might add another dimension to life.

That was how Jo Bradford reacted to Frannie. Even her husband's too-obvious swoop on the newcomer did not prevent her pursuing the acquaintance. Jo and Brad began to see a great deal of Frannie and Marc Browne, and following the course of their relationship Marjorie Lee guides us plumb into the middle of the lion house: that part of the menagerie which seems, compared with the cacophony of the monkeys and the tropical birds, to be truly at peace—and which holds within it murderous forces of hostility and desire.

In her first novel Marjorie Lee has spotlighted the stranger ambiguities of human behaviour with daring brilliance.

THE LION HOUSE

MARJORIE LEE



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**What is our innocence,
what is our guilt? All are
naked, none is safe.**

MARIANNE MOORE

THE LION HOUSE

ONE

SHE was always talking about lions. She had a thing about lions. She used to dream about them; and she was the sort of girl who had to tell her dreams.

We'd be in that walnut den of hers in the house back home with the orange drapes and the little Rouault on the wall. She'd be lying on the studio couch, blue-jeaned knees pulled up and slightly spread; one arm across her stomach, the other hanging, cigarette in hand, to the floor.

'It was coming towards me,' she might say, half spoofing, half intense. 'It was coming towards me: slowly, inevitably, with its shoulders glinting copper in the sunlight. It had eyes like amber hellholes, and its mouth was a death that smiled. . . . Hey, what're lions, Jo?'

'Carnivorous beasts; mammals; found in jungles——'

'Oh, I don't mean like that. I mean what do they *mean*; like how do they stack up in the unconscious and why would you dream about them?'

'I don't dream about them; you do.'

'I meant *you* in the impersonal: *cave*. Why would *one* dream about them?'

'Search me.'

And then suddenly she'd sit up. 'Get me another drink, will you, Jo?'

So I'd get it for her and tell her to go on and say what happened next.

‘Happened next?’ she’d ask, playing the old trick of ditching a mood with me still in it. ‘Asterisks, Jo, asterisks. We gotta use asterisks, sweetie, or we’ll end up getting banned in Boston.’

The first place I ever watched Frannie get banned in was the Wingo Day School. Of course that was a quiet, subtle kind of ban and I doubt that Frannie even took the trouble to notice it.

Wingo is a small progressive project in an area of New York’s Westchester County called Wingowick Hills. It’s one of those all-for-the-love-of-it schools with no financial endowment but that which can be scraped from the barrel-bottoms of parental devotion; and it’s co-operative, which means everybody has got to Co-operate. On warm weekends fathers come out with their offspring to gravel a road or retile a bathroom; and in the summer when classes are over mothers beg, borrow, and steal for the advent of a bang-up bazaar.

It was in November of , I had heard, that Sylvia Morrison phoned Frannie at eleven-thirty in the morning, awakening her from a sound sleep. ‘We’re starting real early this year,’ Sylvia said cheerily, ‘so we’ll have just scads of things for the rummage sale, and the Foleys have offered to store it all in their garage till July! Will you give something? Kids’ clothes, Marc’s ties, chipped ceramics? Anything charming you’re not using, just anything at all?’

‘Sure, sure,’ yawned Frannie, ‘. . . be delighted to. How about a hand-painted diaphragm . . . ?’

Then there was the story the Headmaster’s wife told. She was driving the bus that year because even though

there was a transportation fee for each child it got used up for something else and there wasn't enough money in the till to hire a bona fide driver. Gertrude, her name was; and you know how there are *doctors' doctors* and *writers' writers*? Well, Gertrude was a *friends' friend*. She was friendly to just about everybody, and she listened with the patience of a dictaphone. But, like a dictaphone, she had a way of playing it back. 'I don't mind driving in the least,' she told a group of lunching mothers one day, 'but I must say I wasn't quite prepared for the additional job of putting on other people's children's snowsuits. . . .'

When pressed for further details she reluctantly disclosed that the week before, after honking seven times to no avail, she had got out of the bus, entered the Browne house, and found Petey, Stu, and Blair eating a breakfast of cake and grapes. . . . 'After which,' she went on with a benign smile, 'it seemed to be up to *me* to get them dressed. Marc had left for work, and Frannie was just nowhere to be seen. . . . Sleeping, I suppose,' she added warmly. 'Frannie's quite a sleeper, you know—in the *daytime*.'

But the thing that really clinched the blackball for Frannie was her response to Wingo's *grand prix* of the editorship of its monthly bulletin: Wingo Lingo. Ruth Quinlan called her, virtually bursting with the news. 'We had this meeting last night,' she enthused, 'and everybody voted for *you*! When you get right down to it, you're the only *professional* writer in the whole parent body, and if there's anyone who can give Lingo the spark it's been missing, it's *you*!'

At which point Frannie thanked her for the honour and, quite professionally, asked her to name the salary.

I guess I thought of Wingo because that's where I first met Frannie; or, more likely, because that's where Frannie first met my husband, Brad.

It was one of those parent-teacher parties at the beginning of the Fall semester: a dinner in the Threes room with everyone eating on tiny chairs, off tiny tables, and looking just about as comfortable as Gulliver in the Land of Lilliput.

I was new (Administrative—in charge of enrolment) so I didn't know her when she came in. In fact I might not have noticed her at all if it hadn't been for Brad.

'Who's that?' he asked; and that's when I glanced up and saw her. She had arrived late and alone and she was standing in the middle of the room with a plate of spaghetti in her hand, searching for a place to sit.

I had long become accustomed to Brad's addiction to the fair sex; in twenty-three years of wedded blasphemy I had learned the gentle art of sharing one's husband. Brad was, it just happened, a beautiful man—with a penchant for poetry which he recited in creamy tones, if inaccurately, to any female who would listen.

'I don't know her,' I said, watching the girl in jeans who stood there, ill at ease, turning her short-cropped head from side to side, peering out through glasses in immense black frames.

'Shall we have her join us?'

'Sure,' I said, thinking with an edge grown slightly blunt with wear: *sweet, sweet man; gallant at once to swans and ugly ducklings; as free with the proffered hand to scullery maids as to queens. . . .*

He got up from the table, unfolding his long lean legs for which there was no room, and walked slowly to her. 'Hello,' he said. 'I'm Henry Bradford.'

‘Oh,’ I heard her say, smiling, but only briefly, before she turned away. ‘I’m Frannie Browne.’

‘Will you have dinner with us?’

She smiled again, but the smile was as short-lived as the first had been. It would be months before I learned that the fear in this girl lay, like a twin, beside the courage; the awkwardness beside the charm; and the hate beside the love.

‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘It’s awfully crowded, and Marc——’

Brad, in Brad’s own way, put an arm around her shoulders and steered her to our table. ‘What about “Marc”?’ he asked as they sat down.

‘Oh. Well, he’s in town tonight—at a meeting.’ It seemed important to let us know that there *was* a Marc; that while Frannie Browne was on her own this evening there were legitimate reasons.

Brad introduced me as Elizabeth Johnston Bradford; and I felt an old tug of malaise: *Elizabeth* had always seemed to carry a ring of delicateness. For me, with a bosom surely responsible for the common phrase *Pike’s Peak or Bust*—it was as suitable as a bib on a baby elephant. ‘*Jo*,’ I said. ‘From Johnston. I got it at college and I’ve had it ever since.’

During the course of the meal Brad, more than I, was able to break through and draw her out: she had come to New York almost eleven years ago for a job on the editorial staff of a national magazine. Where, from? Chicago. It was a marvellous city; but No: she didn’t miss it. Or rather, she did; but (laughing) her mother lived there and nine hundred miles were essential for Survival.

‘Survival from what?’ Brad wanted to know.

‘From *her*,’ she answered. ‘You see, she’s—well, she’s the kind of woman who can walk in after not seeing me for six

months and tell me before she even says *hello* that the front door knob needs polishing. . . . I wouldn't mind so much,' she went on, 'but the thing is I always get the feeling that it isn't really the door knob but that the door knob is *me*—you know what I mean? Actually her big pitch is that I don't Live Right. You know: Wild, Disorganized. She used to keep telling me if I didn't settle down and get Systematized I'd be dead before I was thirty.'

Brad shuddered.

'Oh, don't worry,' she assured him. 'I was thirty in June and nothing happened so I guess she was wrong. But the night before my birthday I didn't get to bed at all. . . .'

'Scared?'

'Well, that; and besides, I figured I must just as well be awake when it hit me so I could see what it felt like.'

That *would* be interesting, Brad agreed; to die on your feet; for the *experience*, one might say.

Well, it was true, she argued. After all, if you didn't experience things what would you have to write about?

Then she was a writer? Yes. Along with responsibilities to a husband and three children she was a free-lance writer. And Yes: she had been published: short stories in the slicks, a number in the qualities, and a raft of verse. Marc? Marc was a lawyer. The firm name was quite familiar—one of the top ones in town: Bendheim, Blatz, and Mendes-Cohen. (Browne? I wondered, hating myself for it, what *Browne* had been before the Change.)

How had they met, Brad asked.

'I had this apartment in the Village,' she said, 'and they were having this cocktail party next door. I'd been working on some assignment and I was wearing a shirt and an old pair of slacks that were worn out clear through; and when this boy came over and asked me to go to the party I just

went—I mean right that *minute*; and I got all engrossed in a conversation with somebody, and I guess you know what happened: I forgot to keep my legs crossed. So that's when Marc began to notice me, and four weeks later we got married. About a year after, when I asked him what it was that could possibly have been so attractive about me at that party, he said, "Well, I'll tell you: it was simply a matter of not having been able to resist the view".'

'And how did your mother feel about *that*?' I asked. when we had stopped laughing.

'You mean the marriage? Oh, she just got a friend of hers in New York to check on his professional position and his family background and his standing as a member of the Mill Pond Country Club and when she found out he was terribly top-drawer she decided he was a lovely boy who should have his head examined and gave it two years—which was awfully ungenerous of her: hers lasted eight.'

'Proving,' Brad said, 'that, once more, she was wrong.'

'Yes,' Frannie agreed. 'But that's only because Marc is a saint. I mean how would *you* like to come home and get nine pages for dinner?'

'Does he mind?' I asked.

Oh, not horribly, she supposed; at least not nearly as much as some men might. One day perhaps, though God only knew *which* day, she would make it all up to him by banging out a crazy little novel.

'Why wait?' Brad wanted to know.

'It hasn't happened yet.'

'What hasn't happened yet?'

'It,' she answered thoughtfully. 'The crazy little Plot. . . .'

After dinner we separated and I lost track of her. I didn't think of her again till it was time to go and I couldn't find Brad. I tried the school kitchen. Brad was

big on Kitchen Romance: there was always the excuse of having gone to help so-and-so with the ice-cubes. But there was no one there. It was only after I'd swallowed a pride that was quite used to being swallowed and asked for clues to his whereabouts that I lifted the shade in the Sixes room, looked out into the moon-spattered parking lot, and saw him standing at the window of Frannie's convertible.

' . . . and we'll call you,' he was saying. 'Spend an evening—the four of us.'

'Fine. You'll love Marc.'

'You sure?'

'Positive. Everybody loves Marc.'

'Do you?'

She thought for a minute; not for the answer but because, perhaps, the answer was too big to give. 'A lot,' she said finally.

'Then I,' sighed Brad, 'shall find him unendurable. . . .'

I lowered the shade. It was an old routine; a broken record; the first chapter of the inevitable soap opera I'd lived through, over and over and over, for twenty-three years.

Enter, Frannie Browne, I thought, as I walked across the dark room to the door.

TWO

It was about two weeks before I saw Frannie again. She came over to Wingo one afternoon to pick up Petey for a dentist appointment. I was out of my office getting a breath of air.

'Hi!' I called to her across the playground. She turned and ambled towards me. She was still in blue jeans, and a clean, white boy's shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Her shorn hair, sunbleached in a streaky variance from brown to blonde, was wet at the ends from a recent shower. On her feet she wore a pair of ancient moccasins, one split from the sole so that her toes came through. Standing beside her (though I was barely taller) I felt like an absolute mountain both size and age-wise. 'How've you been?' I asked.

'Just fine.' In the daylight her eyes behind the black-rimmed goggles were green.

'Nice party here the other night,' I offered.

'Hate crowds. Agoraphobia. Know of any cut-rate couches?'

'You? You strike me as the sort of girl who gets along all right. Why dabble in the Unknown?'

'Hey, watch it,' she smiled. 'You're at Wingo. At Wingo Freud is God.'

Gretchen, the Fives teacher, walked over then and changed the subject. 'Petey's doing beautifully,' she told

Frannie. 'Made the Fall adjustment like an eight-year-old. You should have seen him at Circle Time the other morning. Told everybody about his summer in Bermuda.' She turned to me. 'Frannie has the most incredible kids,' she said. 'I had Stu and Blair several years ago before they switched to Llewellyn. They're all terrific. Don't quite know how she does it . . .!'

'*I wanted them,*' Frannie murmured with a simplicity which barely hid the reciprocal barb.

Gretchen had no children of her own; nor, for many reasons (of which Brad was foremost) did I.

I was to meet the Brownes *en masse* the following Friday evening. Frannie called the night after the playground episode and though Brad had a salesmen's meeting to attend on Friday evening he said he'd duck it. His status at MacIntyre Printing, Inc. was wobbly as it was, what with hungover mornings and mid-noon home-comings, and I suggested we make it for another time.

But Brad insisted.

'Here we go again,' I said in the car on our way over. 'Henry Bradford: Boy Lochinvar.'

'You're out of you're mind,' he said with a smile. 'What is she? A little kid with big glasses and bitten nails.'

Frannie met us at the door wearing khaki shorts, a tattersall shirt, and the same torn moccasins. Marc stood behind her, and I felt immediately that we would be friends. There was a clean niceness about ~~him~~ ~~him~~. His face was long

and thin with a receding hairline on either side of a still stubborn forelock that made it seem even longer. His nose sort of swooped, veering off-centre a little, giving him the look of a Modigliani. The rest of him, though, was decidedly masculine: his arms and his legs in their grey flannel shorts were tanned and muscular and covered with a dense blond down. (It's funny how a woman's limbs are impossible with hair, but a man's look like hell without it.)

I saw Brad give him an envious once-over. In spite of a face that had launched a thousand female ships, Brad was built frailly enough to look better clothed than not.

' . . . and this is Marc,' Frannie was saying with a pride I couldn't help but notice. At which point the brood came sailing down the stairs. Petey, I knew. Stu was a larger version, handsomer, less elfin, with, beneath the social surface, a hint of dark moods not unlike Frannie's. Blair, a girl—though I shouldn't have guessed by the name—was charming: half-colt, half-Nereid, she reminded me of meadows and translucent seashells.

At the start of things I saw in Frannie the same closed shyness I'd seen during the first moment of our meeting at the Wingo dinner. But here, on home ground, it took no more than one gin and soda to open her up. When that happened she turned on a record pl-yer that had speakers in every room of the house, including the downstairs john.

The Brownes had two sets of recordings: *His* and *Hers*, as Frannie put it. *His* was long-hair: symphonies, concertos, chamber music, and a deafening supply of what Frannie irreverently called *Wopera*. *Hers* consisted of the

songs of the Thirties, rendered by Ella Fitzgerald, Lee Wiley, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, and a few others: Dorothy Carliss, for instance, who, to me, sounded too refined to live; and somebody else I'd never heard of named Mabel Mercer, who seemed to be going through the agonizing process of losing her heart, soul, and voice all at the same time.

When Frannie began Mabel's *Little Girl Blue* for the third round, Marc put his foot down.

'I've got my own troubles,' he said. 'Let her go tell it to her analyst.'

'She probably has!' Frannie countered with a loyalty one might have displayed in defence of a dearly beloved relative.

Then, having got through half of her second gin and soda, she folded, Turk-sit, on the floor.

'You're so materialistic!' she said to Marc, knitting her brows in a critical frown. 'Or maybe I mean—*representational*. Just because she can't *sing*—you think she can't *sing*! You know what I mean?'

Nobody seemed to, quite.

In any case, we did listen to it all over again: *Old girl, you're through. You might as well surrender. Your hopes are getting slender. Why won't somebody send a tender Blue Boy to cheer up Little Girl Blue . . . ?* On which last phrase Mabel gave up the ghost and wept.

'Now, doesn't that just *do* something to you?' Frannie insisted.

'Yes,' Marc answered. 'It depresses me!'

I found it a bit depressing myself. After twenty-three years in a marital harem, having now reached the questionably mellowed age of forty-six, I was in no condition to be reminded of *old girls* who were *through*.

'You got a *sick-identification*,' Marc told Frannie. 'Anybody suffers, you have to get right in there and suffer along with them!'

'How come all women?' Brad cut in.

'What?'

'How come all female vocalists; no males.'

She thought a minute. Then, with her own brand of earnest patness: 'A person always favours celebrities of the same sex; on the deepest level, that is. Residual education-need: return to the original source: girl babies learn how to become women through their mothers; boy babies how to become men through their fathers.'

'Where'd you get all that?' he asked. 'You been head-shrunk?'

'Uh-uh,' she answered, rattling her glass to get more coldness off the ice-cubes. 'Not me. It's just an armchair hobby of mine, that's all. The idea of actually lying down on an honest-to-God couch turns my blood off. If I go to a party and find there's an analyst there I make up a headache and leave. I've got this feeling I'm running wild in a pasture and the whole damned bunch of them are after me with their butterfly nets waving. . . .' She shuddered.

'Poor Butterfly . . .' Marc chanted in the Puccini manner. 'She has flit from the Voo . . . doos. . . .'

Which must have reminded Frannie of the threat of *His* collection; so to stave him off she jumped in with five different versions of *I Get a Kick Out of You*. 'I'm studying it,' she said. 'You know—like some people spend their lives interpreting *Hamlet*? Take Ella: she does it sort of masochistically. But with Ethel-Merman it's a whole other thing: she does it like she fully intends to kick him right the hell back! *My Funny Valentine*—that's another one. Mary Martin worships the guy; but Mabel's full of pity. You

get the feeling she may be singing it to Toulouse-Lautrec. . . .’

‘You amaze me,’ Brad said.

‘Do I really?’ she asked, crinkling her nose in utter disbelief. ‘Do I *really*?’

It must have been nearly midnight when the others came: Jeri and Len Perloff, and Marian and Jeff Deitz. Drop-ins from Meade’s Manor to Llewellyn were, in spite of distance, nothing in the Browne circle. I did wonder, though, why, since most of their friends lived in Meade’s Manor, the Brownes had chosen a house so far away. Later I decided that this was due to Frannie’s need to keep at arm’s length from anything which might serve to link her with a circumscribed group of any kind. *Freedom from moulds* was one of her favourite phrases.

Marc, born in Boston, had come to New York when he was two and had spent the better part of his premarital leisure on the Number One Course of Westchester’s Mill Pond Country Club. His affiliation had lasted until Frannie appeared on the scene, presenting in rather unminced terms her views on snobs and social segregation. This, added to his own inchoate rebellion against a rock-solid background, had led to the break.

The Perloffs were, hereditarily, Old Meade’s Manor. Len was, anyway. Jeri had trekked the social mile from Caulfield. You know how some people say: *I don’t care about money per se, I just care about what it can do?* Well, I think that’s how Jeri felt about Meade’s Manor. Unlike a good many other residents, she didn’t need it for spiritual sustenance: she just liked having it there *in case*. Pragmatic and purposeful beneath her carefree exterior, she played

both sides of all teams. At the moment she was doubling between hausfrau-and-mothering and account-executing for one of the large advertising agencies in the city. Never one to slip up on a chance for personal development, she had fast become, through the influence of colourful colleagues, a collector of lithographs, a reader of *Partisan Review* and *Peanuts*, a bosom pal of four stage designers and two Zen-Buddhist painters, a near-authority on progressive jazz, a student of the recorder, and patroness (emotionally) of an Irish-American bullfighter.

A slave to fashion fads, she could be glimpsed during any sunny lunch-hour in town, swinging down Madison Avenue in a costume right out of a circus poster by Dali. She was a beanpole redhead, and a short blue sheath over a pea-green leotard was apt to garner attention. It was said by Jeri herself that on attending an exhibit of *avant-garde* sculptures by craftsmen well known throughout the world two young male spectators had circled her silently and then, turning to each other, had whispered simultaneously: '*Whose is that?*'

There was less to be said of Len. Len was a Very Sweet Guy. He had to be.

The Deitzes were sprung of other seeds. They had a great deal in common and most of it was trouble. Marian was Dissatisfied. Marian was Dissatisfied with Everything. Particularly, Marian was Dissatisfied with Jeff's income. Three top-flight analysts had attempt d to point out the presence of the Bluebird in her own back yard. Still, Marian saw nothing but crows.

Jeff was, I felt at first meeting, the kind of man who might well be earning thirty thousand a year. Instead he was working for an uncle in the construction business at far less than he deserved.

'But why?' I wanted to know; and Frannie said, 'Remember *Willy Loman*? "*You have to be well liked*"? Well, Jeff isn't.'

'I like him,' I told her.

'Wait,' she said. 'You won't. He won't let you.'

And she was right. Jeff was a Sneerer: when his car broke down and you offered to lend him yours he called you a sucker; when he heard you'd just spent eighteen dollars on theatre tickets he told you the show was lousy; he got his off-brand Scotch at a special discount and the Highland Nectar you poured and handed him *wasn't worth the money*; and when you walked into a party dressed to the teeth and ripe for gaiety he asked you why you looked so *tired*.

He was handsome; he spoke well; he knew a lot. But deep down inside of him, installed by long-forgotten devils of the past, there was a small, insistent mouthpiece that kept on *yah-yah-yahing*.

I was far more fascinated by the relationships between Frannie and the female halves of both these duos. With Jeri there was an easy friendship going. 'How could I fail to love her?' Frannie asked. 'She's the only girl alive who's as full of bull as I am. She knows it; I know it. We're *safe*.'

It was true. At the onset of each wild adventure, career-wise or domestic, Jeri would telephone Frannie for the borrowing of a non-judgmental ear. And she'd get it. With, to all external appearances at least, an ego the size of Texas, Jeri bowed to no one but Frannie—for the simple reason that Frannie expected her to bow not at all.

The relationship with Marian was harder to figure. Mangy-cruel as two pack rats, people were constantly wondering why either of them bothered to bother. But here too the basis of union was a kind of acceptance. Four

years of on-and-off couch-hopping had given Marian, if little else, a truth-bent psyche. And Frannie, though a non-pro, was well up to meeting the challenge.

Marian, like Frannie, had a stunning young mother who was still running neck-and-neck with the Borgias and Medicis for the Heart of Gold Award.

Their friendship, they both agreed openly, was merely a matter of playing Bad Mother roles for each other.

'You sound just like mine,' Frannie would tell her at the end of some devastating exchange. 'Your obsession with money cripples your emotional eye to the point of total blindness.'

'And you,' Marian would retort, 'are the image of mine. You both walk with your feet turned out like a couple of God-damned ducks!'

'How can you stand it?' I once asked Frannie, being made of less durable stuff myself.

'Therapy,' she explained, diving into a flagrant mixture of metaphors. 'It's constructive to concentrate your venom on one particular dart-board. Shooting all your hostile eggs into one basket prevents you from beating on the *rest* of humanity. At the same time, through Acting Out, you mitigate the traumas of your poisonous beginnings. . . . And anyway, Jo,' she added with a slightly condescending smile, 'hate isn't the worst thing in the world, you know. Hate's even healthy—when it's honest.'

That evening (possibly because Brad and I were new members in their midst) things went off rather smoothly. Len, at the time struggling against the might of Panda and Hallmark with sophisticated greeting cards, got into a discussion with Jeff on the national economy. Marc, with

painstaking patience, was attempting to enlighten Brad on the complexities of forensic psychiatry. And the rest of us spent a good while hashing over the merits of Wingo's nursery school for Marian's four-year-old.

'It's worth every nickel,' Jeri encouraged. 'Dickie'll never get anywhere else the kind of thing he'll get at Wingo.'

'Oh, I don't know,' Marian said. 'Next year he can go to kindergarten, and the suburban public schools are getting more progressive all the time. Frannie told me herself—they make fudge at Llewellyn.'

'Yeah,' Frannie sighed. 'They make fudge. But what good is it? They use a recipe!'

At about 2 a.m. Frannie, somehow having dropped ashes into her glass, left the room to get a clean one. Then, quite suddenly, Brad was missing.

Walking casually into the kitchen, I found him being absolutely true to the old ice-cube alibi. There he was, struggling with a trayful between his hands. His struggle with the tray between his hands, however, was more likely necessitated by the presence of Frannie—between his arms.

'You were great,' I said to him in the car on the way home. 'Just great.'

'What?'

'I'm tired,' I said. 'That's what. I'm tired of playing towel-girl to a half-baked Casanova; tired of wondering who'll be next on that sexy little roster of yours; tired of digging you up out of all the damned kitchens of all the damned wives of all the damned world. What do you suppose *she* thinks of you? Of both of us? I like them. I

want them to like us. But can they? Will they have a chance to?"

'I was helping Marc,' he answered blandly. 'The drinks were getting warm.'

'You mean *you* were.'

He smiled. 'You floor me, Jo,' he said softly. 'You positively floor me. I told you. She's nothing but a little kid with big glasses and bitten nails.'

THREE

THOUGH not especially given to little kids with big glasses and bitten nails (except in their correct chronological age-group) I found as the weeks went by that I was growing closer and closer to Frannie.

Remembering now the initial flush of our friendship I confess to a feeling of ambivalence: (what, for instance, of the kitchen scene?) Yet, there must always be some small smudge of doubt at the onset of any new experience; one moment at least when there is question and the desire to withdraw. Still, the simple truth is: I wanted her close. In all my years of moving from city to city for Brad's ever-changing jobs I had had to forfeit the possibility of lasting relationships. Never before had I been given the chance to lapse warmly and securely into the natural nest of female consortion.

Now: here was Frannie, ready, willing, and able to fill the void. And in spite of the huge black frames behind which she seemed to hide and her hands which were definitely those of a self-gnawed little girl there was an adult side to her that was strong and stimulating.

I began to see how it was possible for a spiritual oak of a girl like Jeri Perloff to bend before Frannie's subtlest zephyr; and also why one like Marian Deitz fought for her individuality against it. I soon found myself listening over and over to Frannie's records, trying my best to sound

intelligent in my analysis of lyrics and deliveries which until now had seemed nothing but *inane*. And I read the books she told me to read because they were, she said, *essential*. *Essential* for *what* I didn't quite see, but the urgency with which she presented them was enough to swing me into line.

Her literary taste, along with her choice of music, was limited to the contemporary: it ruled out the past completely, almost compulsively, and stopped just short of the *avant-garde*. At times it seemed that if it weren't for life-savers like Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, and J. D. Salinger she might have perished of cultural malnutrition altogether. But then—who was I to criticize? Aside from my concern over Wingo's young enrollees, a small interest in Leftist politics, and the constant re-evaluations I was called upon to make in order to stay married to Brad, I hadn't had a provocative thought since college.

Coming across an old faculty report on her which had been stuck into a book I borrowed, I was not surprised to read: 'Frannie rarely comes to class prepared with the assigned material. Instead she makes up her own facts as she goes along. I would not know how to grade her if we *did* use the grade system here; but she has been most interesting to the group and to myself.'

When, on returning the book, I handed her the report and kidded her about it, she smiled. 'That was Hadley,' she said. 'Taught a course called Today's Classics. She was terrific. Five-feet-eleven, can you imagine? I mean without heels.'

'Just what,' I asked, 'did her height have to do with her competence at teaching?'

'Oh, nothing, I guess.' She sighed, falling suddenly into a meditative depression. 'I wish I were tall,' she mused.

'I wish I were so tall I could watch a parade over the heads of everyone else in the world. . . .'

'Well,' I consoled, 'when you get right down to it, how many parades does a person have to watch in this country?'

'Oh, Jo!' She grimaced. 'You know what I mean!'

And of course I did—*that* time; but there were others when I didn't have a glimmer.

One Saturday afternoon I drove back from a shopping trip in town to the little carriage house Brad and I rented and found her convertible in the driveway. It gave me a great lift to see it there. I honked a tattoo on my horn so she'd know I'd arrived and then flew in, grinning from ear to ear. She was lying on our second-hand sofa, head on one of its threadbare arms. Beside her on the coffee table there was an almost empty gin and soda and an ash-tray spilling with butts.

'You been here long?' I asked.

'Two hours or so.' She swung her jeaned legs down and stood up to stretch.

'Didn't you get bored waiting?'

'Bored? The quiet was heavenly. When I left the kids with the day's worker they were playing dodge-ball in the living-room.'

We went into the kitchen then to refill her glass and to get one for me.

'I've been thinking,' she said, sliding on to a wooden chair. 'How come you haven't divorced Brad?'

The question took me by surprise. 'Why would you ask a thing like *that*?'

'Oh, I don't know . . . but it does seem rather obvious

that you—well, that you don't really like him too much.'

'I do like him!' I blurted defensively. 'It's just that sometimes he's a little—oh, a little impossible to live with, that's all.'

She laughed. 'So I'd gather.'

'What do you mean?' I knew what she meant all right, but I was annoyed—as I always was when I had to face the fact that Brad's shortcomings were obvious. Now, wilfully hurting myself, I pressed her further. 'What, precisely, do you mean?'

She looked away. 'You know,' she said.

Had there, then, been sequels to the ice-cube episode? My annoyance flared. 'If you mean his penchant for *les femmes*,' I said, 'don't take it to heart. You, baby, are approximately Number Twenty-five. . . .'

She lifted the glass to her mouth with both hands and focused her eyes on the rim so they seemed to cross a little. Then she pulled one knee up against her chest. I was sorry I'd said it.

'What I mean is——' I began, trying to make amends.

'Forget it, Jo,' she interrupted. 'Standing in queues for things has never appealed to me. Not for inessentials anyway.'

I had been put in my place in a way I'd watched her stop others. Having enjoyed witnessing those thrusts, I was less intrigued when I myself was the target. 'I happen to be used to it,' I said, attempting to be light. 'Got him that way myself, as a matter of fact.'

She looked up, interested.

'That was twenty-seven years ago,' I said, wanting for some reason to tell her things. 'He was twenty-two then and I was nineteen, in on a college vacation, supposedly

visiting an old Baltimore aunt of mine. He was living in a little dive near the Patapsco River with this woman my aunt knew, named Sonya, who was old enough to be his mother. She must have been tired of playing Jocasta though, because she was really insistent about my coming up for dinner to meet him.'

'So you went?'

'So I went. And stayed for three weeks, I might add. Then I had to go back to school; but after that it got to be my headquarters for holidays.'

She reached for a pack of cigarettes on the table and lighted one thoughtfully. 'Could you—could you *enjoy* a thing like that?' she asked. 'I mean—with *her* there? Wouldn't it sort of—cramp a person's style?' Then she faced me, eye to eye. 'Unless, of course,' she added, 'one *needed* an audience for *kicks*. . . .'

Her earnestness amused me. 'Don't tell me you're shocked,' I said. 'I thought you were rather Bohemian yourself!'

'I am neither shocked *nor* Bohemian,' she stated flatly.

'Well, you sound pretty unfettered to me,' I argued. 'At least in comparison with most of the people around here. I can't say I've heard of many Pillars of Society going to cocktail parties with their slacks' crotches torn out.'

'Don't be deluded,' she said. 'Mere counter-phobic action. Jewish: Middle-to-Upper-Middle. Chicago's *Marjorie Morningstar*. Uncle was my grandmother's brother. *Neville Sapperstein* could have been my nephew! I'll admit I've made an honest *try*, Jo; but you can lose a leg unfettering yourself from a set-up like that. . . .'

'It doesn't show at all,' I said. 'Not the kids, or Marc either. I wouldn't have known if it hadn't been for the

law firm and the mention of Mill Pond. Not that I ever know who's what anyway. . . . I never think of it,' I added, flushing just slightly at the partial lie.

'You don't have to think of it,' she said. 'I do.'

We were quiet for a few minutes. It wasn't until after I'd poured her another drink that she carried the conversation back to Brad. 'He must have been really something in those days,' she began.

I was always pleased to dwell on Brad's looks. They were, I think, one of my major rationalizations for putting up with him. 'He was incredibly beautiful,' I said.

'He still is.'

'Not *as*,' I told her. 'You should have known him then. I've got a picture upstairs. Shall I go get it?' I went before she answered. It was a little snapshot in a silver frame, sitting on the bed-table next to one of my father. I stood there for a minute looking at both of them even though doing that always made me feel like hell. Brad's reminded me too much of the past and the crawling of time, towards what end I didn't know; and my father's had been taken on our old lawn just outside Providence a week before he'd died of pneumonia brought on by nothing more than a common cold and no real interest in living any longer.

I picked up Brad's and carried it down to Frannie.

'Hey . . .' she breathed, and then she brought both legs up, feet on the chair edge, and stared at it between her knees.

'Nice?' I asked, leaning over her from behind with my chin just brushing the top of her head.

'Dorian Gray . . .' she murmured. Then, passing it back to me over her shoulder: 'Take it!'

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing,’ she half-laughed. ‘I was just thinking of that portrait in the attic!’

‘Come on,’ I said, ‘he isn’t all that bad.’ But the analogy had hit me and when I put the picture down on the sink top I turned my face away to hide my irritation.

Frannie had a wrist-watch on that day (the same one she was later to lose), and when she glanced at it, she whistled. ‘Have to leave immediately!’ she said. ‘We’re going to the Perloffs’ for dinner.’

‘Oh, stay a while. Brad’ll be home soon. He’ll want to say hello to you.’

‘Can’t.

‘Oh, come on. Please.’

I don’t know why it seemed suddenly to matter so much, to matter at *all*, that she wait and see him. But there had been something exciting in telling her about our early relationship, in showing her the picture of him when he was young. Or maybe the remark about Dorian Gray was still cutting me. Maybe I wanted him to walk in and charm her out of the conviction she had that he was—*inessential*. Maybe it was twenty other things. I didn’t know. I only knew that I wanted her to wait.

She was still refusing when I heard his car in the driveway, and he was in before she could get out. ‘Hi, darlings,’ he said, putting an arm around each of us. His body between us seemed to act as a kind of conductor and I could almost feel her tighten on the other side of him. Then he dropped his arm from me and the current was broken. ‘Where are you rushing?’ he asked, still holding her close.

Carefully, deliberately, she freed herself. 'Dinner party.'

'Oh.' His face fell.

'You could—crash,' she said hesitantly. 'Jeri and Len. It's not as if you didn't know them.'

He brightened. 'Bring our own bottle?'

'The Perloffs have enough bottles for everyone,' I put in. 'The point is: you weren't invited.'

'Invited? What do you need—an engraved announcement from Tiffany's? Frannie's their friend, and Frannie invited us.'

'You might call them first,' Frannie suggested.

'I'm not calling them first,' I said. 'I'm not calling them at all.'

She left then and Brad walked her out to the car. It was quite a while before I heard the motor start up and even longer before he came in again, looking, I thought, slightly on the Cheshire side. I supposed he had kissed her good-bye and was dying for me to ask so he could tell me about it. It wasn't simply Brad's pleasure to sow wild oats about the entire social terrain: he had to let me know exactly where they had been strewn and how they were doing. But in all our years together I had learned a warfare of my own: a refusal to reach for the bait, to even notice. So, when he returned from Frannie's farewell (which, at the time, I felt certain must have been distasteful to her) I merely handed him a drink and smiled back.

But hidden gripes have a way of festering to large angers and in no time at all the evening became intolerable. Though I had been eager for him to come home while Frannie was still there, her departure left a frustrating void in its wake. Her absence, in some strange way, robbed the night of any possible compatibility. Over a

pot-luck supper of cold chicken and left-overs I wished we had been invited to the Perloffs'. Not that I had expected much come-on from that quarter. The close friends of close friends rarely like each other. Jeri was quite possessive and probably felt her relationship with Frannie and Marc threatened by the deep inroads Brad and I were making.

At about nine I threw down a book I couldn't concentrate on and went upstairs.

'Don't go to sleep,' Brad said. 'I'll be there in a minute.'

'I'm tired,' I told him.

'Come on, Jo,' he pleaded. '*Your way . . .*'

But even my way, without the awkward burden of his weight, would have been unbearable that night.

I went up to the bedroom and took my clothes off. Looking into the long mirror I saw the fullness of my breasts. Unaccountably, I thought of Frannie. I suspected that the loose boys' shirts she wore covered next to nothing. Brad was right: what was she? A little kid with big glasses and bitten nails. The realization of this somehow elated me; and seeing my body once more, I was suddenly filled with desire. I went to the door to call down to Brad. But something stopped me. I don't know what; but it stopped me cold. I turned, got into bed, and fell asleep.

I rarely remember my dreams. But I did have one that night and for some reason it stays with me: I was walking down a street; a busy street, like Broadway. At the corner I saw a man. He was very tall and very handsome and around his neck he wore a beautiful orange ascot. I didn't recognize the man, but I seemed to recognize the ascot; so I went up to him, and took it off. As I was standing there looking at it in my hands, a girl appeared. She was

quite young, almost a child. 'Here,' I said to her. 'This scarf is your colour. It belongs to you.' At that moment she began to run. I ran after her. 'Wait,' I kept calling. 'You forgot to take this, and it's yours!'

FOUR

OF all the women I had ever known (or ever will, I would think) Frannie was the most articulate about sex. Having thought in those first few months of our friendship that the subject would interest her little if at all it came as rather a surprise when during one of her daytime visits after school I happened casually and without purpose to toss the sexual ball into our conversation and found that she was quite willing to pick it up and run with it.

We were talking, I recall, about college. She was telling me that her four years at the exclusive and progressive X—— had been entirely serious; that she had been completely infatuated with new ideas and the processes of original thinking. I admitted that I could make no such educational claims; that my own four years at Y—— had been one long trek from frat house to frat house; and that before my third, during which I met Brad, I had broken all records with the significant score of seventeen affairs.

She told me then about a boy she'd been in love with in her Junior and Senior years: a Yale man and brother of a classmate of hers. 'We had our first date in New York—blind,' she said. 'When I put him on the train he asked me up for the following week-end and I knew immediately and without the slightest question that that would be it.'

'How did you do?'

‘Not at all like they write it in the novels,’ she answered. ‘It’s such a complicated, delicately-put-together thing, that first time. Why do writers always have to go and wreath it with a ton of God-damned orchids? Why not daisies or dandelions—you know what I mean?’

I remembered my first: in the back seat of a car. And I remembered my description of it to the girls in the sorority. I told it the way Frannie had just said the writers did: full of hot purple orchids; no daisies or dandelions at all. . . .

I looked over at her, sitting in the armchair with her legs curled up under her; and she looked back at me, putting me on the spot. ‘I know what you mean,’ I said; but then, unwilling to give up my stand for hers, I added, ‘On the other hand, it would depend on the individual. After all, we aren’t all——’

‘The *honesty* of the individual,’ she cut in. ‘Look, Jo—it’s a big thing to become a woman, isn’t it? A *whole* woman, that is. It doesn’t just simply happen one day because you go to bed with a guy. Sex does, yes. But not true *sexuality*. That takes growing; and you can spend your whole *life* growing. You make such a thing of it, Jo. It’s as if you keep trying to *prove* something all the time. . . .’

It was one of those moments when I wanted to drag her up and shake her like a rag doll. But then Brad walked in. He looked especially well that day and his mood was high as a bird’s. ‘Knew you were here, Franni-o!’ he said with a happy breathlessness. ‘Saw your car outside!’ Passing the couch he bent to kiss me a brief but sweet hello. ‘You too,’ he said to Frannie, crossing the room. ‘Mmmmmm,’ he murmured as she lifted her face shyly. ‘Now let’s have a drink!’

‘Just used the last of the soda,’ I said. ‘Drive over and get a case, will you?’

‘Sure. Who’ll come with me?’

‘Frannie will,’ I said. ‘She’s been sermonizing for two hours. She needs a breath of fresh air.’

‘You go, Jo,’ she said. ‘I have to get home.’

‘Oh, *no*!’ Brad groaned. ‘The party’s just beginning! Stay for dinner. Call Marc and tell him to come here from the office.’

‘You forget: I’m the mother of three hungry children. Though come to think of it, Connie cleaned today. Maybe she’d feed them and sit tonight.’

So she called, and Connie agreed. Then she got Marc and he was game too; a few minor finish-ups and he’d be up in an hour.

‘Get that soda,’ I told Brad. ‘If they aren’t closed now they will be any minute.’

He held out his hand to Frannie. ‘Come on, Mrs Browne darling.’

Pausing with one arm in the sleeve of her coat she turned to look back at me. ‘Let’s all three of us go,’ she suggested.

‘Can’t,’ I said. ‘I’m the cook.’

I got a chicken out and filled it with an easy apple stuffing. Then I began tossing us a big raw vegetable salad. But all the while I had this funny feeling about being alone. It wasn’t resentment, exactly; I didn’t need any help with dinner and Frannie was zero in a kitchen anyway. But somehow I wished she hadn’t gone. Realizing then that I had been the one to send her I felt even odder. After all, it was kind of silly to give Brad the chance to go off with

anyone considering the messes he'd got into in the past; and another thing: that little talk with Frannie had ended on a slightly irksome note. What had she been trying to say? That I was lacking in some way that she wasn't?

I nicked my finger on the paring knife and yelped.

When I heard the car brake outside I thought it must be they. But it was Marc. I was pleased. In all the months we'd known them I'd never been alone with him; never had the opportunity, really, to talk to him. Of the four of us he seemed the most remote. I don't mean that he wasn't friendly; he was. It was just that Frannie, Brad, and I had built an intensity into the relationship to which Marc seemed immune. I wondered about it. Did he display this hands-off quality with all people, or was it only with us? Then there was his relationship with Frannie; I wondered about that too. While I often sensed an easy warmth between them, their outward behaviour with each other was undemonstrative. I had never seen them kiss or touch or speak even the semblance of an endearment. At times they struck me as two close but casual siblings; at other times I got the feeling that Marc played Stabilizing Father to Frannie's complex and precocious Little Girl. I had recently read de Beauvoir: there was something called the *infantile woman*. Could that be Frannie's cubby hole? No; I was constantly having to remind myself that appearances were too often misleading. What of the sudden adulthood; the unexpected femininity; the peculiarly disturbing insights which, even when unspoken but only glanced or smiled, could pierce the sheath of my own maturity and cast me headlong to the level of a child?

As Marc stood beside me in the kitchen there were a hundred questions I wanted to ask him: about her, about

him, about them; but wanting to, I was afraid; and, too, I didn't know how or where to begin. 'They're getting soda,' I told him. 'They ought to be back any minute now.'

A shadow of annoyance crossed his face.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

'She knew I was coming, didn't she? She could have been here.'

'Well, they'll be back soon. We ran out of soda, and——'

'So you said.' He took the bowl in which I'd made the stuffing and began washing it.

'Don't,' I said. 'I'll clean up later.'

'Force of habit,' he explained. 'Have you ever seen our kitchen after Frannie's boiled an egg? The Augean Stables.'

'You can't have everything,' I said. 'Marry a writer and bask in the pride of bylines. It's worth it, isn't it?'

'Completely invalid,' he answered. 'That's *her* theory; but the truth is: it's just an alibi for ducking the dirty work.' He was taking pot-shots at her. I'd never heard him do that before.

'Complaint Department?'

He looked up. 'Not really,' he said, leaning against the sink, nibbling a heart of celery. 'If she changed I'd have to adjust all over again. It was hard enough the first time.'

We were getting nowhere; though where I wanted to get I wasn't quite sure. No; that's not true. I knew what I wanted to know: I wanted to know about Frannie. I wanted to know what she was like: *all* of what she was like—when she was home alone with him; when she wasn't playing to the gallery. But why? Was my curiosity strange, uncalled-for? I doubt it. Writers seem always to be objects

of interest; maybe because somehow we've all come to assume they have an inside track to Love. Well then, did Frannie? Surely she had written of it; written of it well enough to sell. But that was merely a matter of words on paper. What happened when this same emotion belonged not to a cast of literary characters, but to Frannie herself? What words would she choose *then* for its expression? What look? What everything?

But it wasn't the sort of question you went around asking people's husbands; least of all husbands like Marc. He was smart and deep and sensitive all right; but unlike Frannie who, once unblocked, could pour like Niagara, he kept this thoughts to himself.

He was watching me now. 'You're looking pensive,' he said. 'What's on your mind?'

'Nothing. I was just wondering whether or not to whip up a dessert. Frannie could use a couple of extra pounds.'

He had finished the celery and was rifling through the vegetable bin. 'Optical illusion,' he said, coming up with a carrot. 'She isn't nearly as frail as you think she is. Got a scraper?'

I handed him one and took hold of his wrist to look at his watch. 'I didn't know how late it was!' I said. 'Where are they?'

'Getting soda, you told me.'

'Yes, but that was an hour ago. The store is just down the road; ten minutes at most.'

As I said it the door bashed open and Brad staggered in under the weight of the case.

'Where were you?' I asked. 'I was beginning to worry.'

'What about?' he gasped, lowering the case with a clumsy crash.

'Your driving, darling, leaves something to be desired.'

'Castrator!' he shouted merrily. 'Isn't that the correct term, Mrs Freud?'

Frannie smiled. Then she peeled off her cashmere polo coat and dropped it in a soft heap on the floor.

'Pick that up,' Marc said. 'A hundred and fifty bucks and God knows what for the upkeep.'

'A hundred and forty-nine ninety-five,' she emended, 'and the upkeep is negligible. I rarely get it cleaned. It looks *chic-er* dirty.'

'Pick it up,' he said again, firmly.

Obediently she bent to retrieve it and carried it out to the hall closet.

'Hey,' I called as she went through the door. 'Your shirt's out at the back.' And did the falter in my voice get past my throat as clearly as I felt it within? Did anyone know, or notice? Frannie must have. For a second she stopped dead in her tracks. Then: 'Oh, is it?' she asked offhandedly; and went on.

When she returned, it was neatly tucked in.

The chicken took ages, which mattered only because it gave Brad too much time to tank up. I was afraid we'd lose him to his usual alcoholic miasma; but he hung on for Marc's and Frannie's sake.

After dinner Frannie, seeming intuitively aware of my conversation with Marc in her absence, made a large show of domesticity by washing all the dishes. Brad had, I suppose, expected me to tackle the clean-up by myself so that he could impress both Brownes in the living-room with a recitation of slightly misquoted poetry. Obviously put out by Frannie's preference of K.P. he went upstairs

for a nap, asking us to wake him when we were finished.

We forgot him entirely until Frannie began browsing through the bookcase and found an old set of anagrams. She was delighted. A few years before she and Marc had spent three and four nights a week playing with a brilliant couple named Weinrick in Meade's Manor. The four of them had created a handbook of complicated and brain-busting rules and had wound up doing it for money. Within a year no less than several hundred dollars had changed hands.

'Let's try it,' I said, intrigued with the idea of clashing with experts.

'Okay,' Marc agreed. 'But I warn you: I've had it with the Weinricks. At the first sign of bloodshed, I quit.'

'Pacifist!' she flung at him, proceeding to turn the letters face-down on the bridge table. 'What's wrong with a little harmless expression of hostility? There are lots worse ways of fighting your dearly beloveds. Go on, Jo—get Brad.'

But I was already on my way back to the kitchen for the ice-bucket. 'You get him,' I said. 'I'm going to need a drink to cut the tension''

'No—you,' she said. 'I'm not exactly practised at arousing him from slumber.'

'A piercing shriek or a splash of cold water might do it,' I told her.

So she went up for him; and once again I became aware of the passage of time and felt that maybe I should have gone myself. Not that I had expected him to leap from bed at her first nudge. He was one of those people who awakened hard, if at all. Seven or eight minutes was not, then, an untoward interim. And anyhow, what was I so concerned about? The thing with the shirt? Ridiculous.

Shirts do come untucked in the normal course of moving about. And suspicion, piled up over the years, could become a disease. Besides, Frannie was too smart for him. Her aesthetic eye might well be caught by that lovely face of his; but, much as I hated to admit it, a girl would have to be pretty stupid to get tied up with Brad the way he was these days. I was—but then I had known him when he was young. He'd wanted a good many things in those years: dreamed about jobs abroad, South America, the Orient; life in villas and châteaux and pagodas. He'd had drive then: read a lot, thought a lot; held people spellbound when he talked. It was only later, I told myself, that things went flat on him somehow; that he lost the spark and slipped into weary, bleary mediocrity.

Oh, no: Brad was not for Frannie. For all her wanting to break the shackles of a middle-class background she'd never in a million years mess up the good thing she had with Marc for a crazy fling with a man like Henry Bradford.

But instead of warming to the safety of that thought, it annoyed me. Maybe he was a flop; but he was my flop. He was a liar; but he was my liar. He was nothing; but he was my nothing. And Frannie's rejection of him was a rejection of me.

It was quite an evening. Brad was surprisingly awake when they came downstairs together; none of the sullen, rubbery ineffectuality with which he usually got up. His eyes seemed positively lit from within. He was so relaxed he even had his sleeves rolled up. Brad never wore his sleeves rolled up: no swimming trunks on beaches with his top bare; no sports shirts in the hottest heat of summer. And the secret? his right forearm. Centred between the wrist and the elbow—a garish tattoo in blue and red of the

Washington Monument, acquired impulsively during the early Sonya era. He was mortally ashamed of it. You never saw it, not ever, unless you knew him very, very well.

We played for two or three hours, timing our forty-five-second moves on an old stop-watch of Brad's. I knew inside the first fifteen minutes that none of us stood a chance against Frannie. Even Marc fell into a pretty lagging second place behind her. Of course he didn't try as hard; he was playing for the fun of it. Frannie went at it like a convict filing the cell-bars. I could see now what the game with the Weinricks must have been like. Her skill would have been interesting to watch and vie with if that had been all there was to it. It was her dead-earnest adherence to technicalities, empowered by the bludgeon of her drive, that made you want to kill her.

' . . . And the Weinricks were even worse than she,' Marc said. 'So you can see why I finally called a halt. Actually, I liked tonight. Tonight was tame. She's embarrassed about letting you have it full force because you're new at it. With old hand she's a fiend. . . .'

'*Fiend . . .*' mused Frannie. 'All you need is two *I*'s and an *L-T-Y* and you've got *infidelity*. . . .'

They left at about 3 a.m.: Marc red-eyed with fatigue, Brad and I staggering, and Frannie brightly elated as a sprite at dawn—due, she said, to the *therapeutic release of repressed aggressivity*.

Brad didn't kiss her good night, probably because Marc was there; but in a whoosh of admiration and affection, I did. In return she brushed my cheek briefly and stepped

back. It was such a funny hit-and-miss little peck that I burst out laughing. She seemed puzzled by my amusement and about to ask me why; but then Marc called to her and she got into the car.

FIVE

WE didn't see the Brownes the following week-end. We had the Finches down. Helene was an old sorority sister of mine who had married Dick Finch, a town boy, and settled near the university after graduation. With all our endless migrating we hadn't seen them for years. It had taken months of correspondence to arrange for this visit and now that we were about to have our reunion I felt, for old time's sake, that we'd do better alone.

We picked them up on a Friday evening at Grand Central and, having taken Marc's offer of the loan of his membership card, had dinner at the Juniper Club.

Dick hadn't changed a bit: he was still the blue-eyed baby-faced boy he'd been the day he gave Helene his fraternity pin. And Helene, in tweed top-coat and shetland sweater, showed little to betray the span of time but a few more laughing lines around her mouth. I felt, with my mouse-brown, pinned-back mane, that I had aged as badly as the beautiful girl of Shangri-la once she had overstepped the boundaries of that magic land. 'One of these days,' I remarked at dinner, 'I'm going to prostrate myself before Elizabeth Arden and emerge with the russet tresses of my youth.'

'The hell you are,' Brad said.

'Brad loves me this way,' I explained lightly. 'The more

moth-eaten the better. If he had it to do all over again he'd marry Whistler's Mother.'

'No, he's right,' Helene said. 'Severe hair-dos can be perfect for certain types of women, and you're one of them, Jo. It's—dignified.'

'Thanks,' I told her, 'but don't tout dignity with *my* ass.'

She blushed. I had forgotten for the moment that while we were close friends she had never been quite able to accept my language; nor several of my more 'colourful' ideas. At college the lurid tales of my journeys through the male mill had left her awed but disapproving. During the course of innumerable all-night bull-sessions, sitting cross-legged on my bed, she had tried again and again to steer me up the Straight and Narrow. 'It's only because I'm so fond of you, Jo,' she would say. There were times when this fondness of hers became oppressive; but I in turn was fond of her, and so put up with it. I had found, in fact, a kind of demonic pleasure in shocking her. While telling her of my nocturnal escapades I had always been sure to include the most graphic details, undoubtedly more than half aware that the mental images she must then cart about secretly would be bound to plague her.

Seated now across a table from her, so many years later, I saw again the flicker of discomfort in her face brought on by my remark about dignity, and wanted in the same demonic way to go on with my profanity. I didn't—because of the hovering head waiter and my concern with Marc's reputation at the Juniper.

The next morning we got up rather late and Helene and

I prepared a brunch for kings. Things might have gone off charmingly if Brad hadn't spiked a two-quart pitcher of orange juice with half a bottle of gin, and then insisted on consuming it single-handed.

I like to believe, the basic concepts of Sigmund Freud to the contrary, that if it hadn't been for that single act of imprudence on his part I might have been able to live out the rest of my life in its accustomed rut of apathy; float happily along on my personal raft of rationalization and delusion; and that the all-hell which was soon to break loose might, without the existence of that one pitcher of polluted orange juice, have been averted. This, of course, is sheer idiocy: no one punch is ever totally responsible for the ultimate knock-out; but, as I say: I like to believe.

When brunch was over I suggested a ride over to Wingo to show the Finches the situs of my new career. Brad frowned a boozed and petulant frown. 'I've had enough of that place to last for eternity,' he said. 'Wingo Day School, nothing! With Jo it's the Wingo Day and Night School!' So we went alone, leaving him behind to do the kitchen.

It was fun; yet, the pleasure I took in showing them around made me conscious of how much a part of me Wingo had become: how deeply I relied on it as a haven of escape from the insecurity and sense of displacement in the other areas of my life; and how possessive I had grown about its students. In presenting the artistic and mechanical creations of their young hands I was as peacock-proud as any mother might have been; in a way, more so. And it was with a painful deliberateness that I had to bring myself back to the reality that they were not, after all, my own children, but merely strangers who,

while entering through my acceptance at the bottom, would one day graduate, pass the top, and be for ever lost to me.

'Really, Jo,' Dick said unwittingly, 'you ought to see yourself. You'd make the world's best Momma, you know that?' And I answered, 'Can't fight fate'—lightly, casually, not wanting to let him know how far his remark had plunged within me; how impossible it would have been for Brad and me to have a child. *Wait'll next year*, he had kept saying, as next year came and went; *wait'll I land a job I like*; *wait'll we have more money*. And then, finally: *Give it up, Jo; please give it up. I couldn't really stand it. I need you all for me. . . .*

How could I, with any conscience, have a baby? How could I trap an infant with a father who had himself never grown beyond the emotional slats of his own play-pen?

We got home at about four-thirty to find the kitchen in the same chaotic state we'd left it; but Brad, if bleary, was still awake, so I forgave him.

'Just in time for the cocktail hour,' he said, swinging a shaker of martinis above his head. 'Look, I even put the glasses in the ice-box so they'd be cold.'

It was chilly out so I lighted the first fire of the season and we clustered around it. Brad pulled a cushion off a chair and lay back on it, martini in one hand, the other up behind his head. 'Tell me,' he murmured drowsily, 'how did you like the Garden of Allah?'

'Wingo? It's marvellous,' Helene answered.

'You mean miraculous,' Brad said. 'Miraculous in the Divine sense, that is. Did you know? It's Jo's religion.'

'Oh, cut it out,' I sighed. 'So I've got myself an Interest. What's so terrible about a person having an Interest?'

'Interest, my foot,' he droned. 'You've got a ten-ton case of Mother Surrogateship. Or isn't that the accepted terminology? Call Frannie; she'll know.'

I realized with a peculiar little pang: it was the first time her name had come up since the Finches had arrived.

'Who's Frannie?' Helene wanted to know.

Brad was silent. Then he laughed a soft, low laugh.

I looked at him. His face by firelight seemed richly bronze. The tightly drawn skin of his chin and cheekbones caught the reflected glow and shone. The two white temple-wings in his still-black hair slanted over his ears as sharply and perfectly as if they had been painted there. In his eyes there was a veiled thing, a half-closedness, something belonging to memory or even dream; a film lowered against a hidden place within him; a place that was no one's but his. For a minute I loved him. For just a minute it seemed that I had never loved anyone as much as him. But it was the childlike love that grows of inaccessibility.

'Who's Frannie?' he asked slowly. '“Who is Frannie, what is she . . .?” You tell them, Jo. You tell them who Frannie is. . . .'

I lit a cigarette. 'The Brownes,' I said. 'New friends of ours. We met them in the Fall, through Wingo. Wonderful people, both of them.'

Brad laughed again; the same soft laugh that seemed to hold a secret in it. 'Wonderful people,' he said. 'Boy, that Frannie sure is one wonderful people. . . .'

'Don't sell Marc short,' I put in. 'Marc is——'

'Mark is okay,' he said. 'Marc's okay all right, only—'

Marc doesn't like me. Tell me: why doesn't Marc like me?

'He does,' I said. 'Why do you think——'

'Oh, he does not. Stop making with the Big Happy Family. Marc does not like me. Men *never* like me, come to think of it—you know that? You see all these guys sitting around talking; at parties, you know? Getting *along*. Well, not with me; I'm out of it. Even when I'm right there, I'm out of it. And Marc does not like me, and I wanna know why. Why doesn't he?'

I didn't answer. If it was true, I didn't want to hear it.

'But what the hell,' he went on, beginning to smile. 'Frannie likes me. Franni-o, than which there is no whicher. . . .'

'Come on, Brad,' Helene urged. 'You've got us all hanging by the thumbs. What's she like?'

'She's——' I knew he was going to say it. I knew the words by heart now, and I sat there feeling that if he said it I would scream. 'She's—nothing but a little kid with big glasses and bitten nails. . . .'

'Well, then, why all the fuss about her?' Dick asked.

Brad lifted himself heavily to his elbow and tried to focus his eyes squarely into Dick's. 'Dickie,' he said. 'Dickie, m'boy. . . .' His speech was suddenly furry as a squirrel. 'She'z a girl—who knowz howda: *wake up!*'

None of us got him. 'Wake up?' I asked with a laugh. 'Never struck *me* as the early-bird type. Sleeps till noon most of the time!'

'S not whadda mean,' he said, swaying a little. 'Whadda mean is: sh'knowz howda wake up *me!*' With effort he turned again to look at Dick. 'Dick,' he said; and his words came clearer now, strengthened by an interest in what he was saying. 'Dick, y'oughta been here. Th'other

night she was over, playing anagrams. Can she play anagrams! Only anagrams isn't the only thing she plays. . . . Well, I'm taking this nap, and when it gets to be time to play, Franni-o comes up to wake me.' He sat up then, dropped his head into his hands, and chuckled. 'Walks around looking like s-somebody's k-kid brother,' he went on. 'But the way she wakes you up . . . *oh, you kid!*'

'Hey, wait——' Dick began, bewildered; while Helene, that paragon of propriety, went scarlet with embarrassment.

But Brad didn't notice. Carried away on the wings of an inner triumph, he was singing. Driving home his point like a battering-ram, dropping his punch like a ton of bricks, he was singing *The Marseillaise*.

I got to my feet. I walked out of the living-room into the kitchen. Automatically I began to wash the brunch dishes. I picked up the glass pitcher. There was just about an inch of the stuff left at the bottom. *You did it*, I thought, looking at it before I spilled it out; personifying it; talking to it within myself as though it were alive with a heart and a brain and could hear me. *You did it. If it hadn't been for you he wouldn't have got that bad; if it hadn't been for you he might never have let me know.*

But I thought it without feeling; or maybe I did feel, but I can't remember the feeling now. You can't ever recall pain; not actually; not really the way it was. Once I asked Frannie about childbirth. She had been standing at the window with her back towards me. The way she leaned on the sill made her jeans stretch flat and tight across her buttocks; and her feet were bare. I had been reminded of modern dancers: slim, boyish ones who have a liteness, a grace no female ever has. And when finally she turned I

asked her (why: I haven't the slightest idea) to tell about the pain.

'You can tell about it intellectually,' she had said, slowly, thinking as she talked. 'But in the repetition it loses its meaning and becomes something else. It's supposed to hurt; I suppose it did—and I must have known then. But I don't know now; not the way you mean, anyway. I only know that when they brought me down I was happy. I was so happy the world swam. But I can't tell you what that was either. Can anybody ever really tell what it's like when the world swims?'

After the dishes I went upstairs. I could no more have faced the Finches than my own mother; nor could I bear to look at Brad.

We had a spare bedroom on the second floor: a tiny cubicle with one small window. We used it as a storage place for clothes and valises. There was a cot in it. I went in and locked the door behind me and lay down. There was an old mustard chair cushion lying on the floor. It wasn't ours. It had been left by the last tenants; or other tenants years before them. I reached down and picked it up and covered my face with it. It was damp and dirty and it made me sick; but, unreasonably, I wanted to be sick. I pressed it down against my nose and mouth and tried to take the stench in. I gagged and a gush of something warm and stinging flooded my throat. When I caught my breath I was crying.

Brad came up a while later and knocked a jaunty drum-beat on the door. 'Hey, Jo,' he called, 'we're going out for dinner!' I didn't answer; and soon I heard his footsteps fading down the stairs.

I didn't come out. I stayed there, sleeping, waking, thinking, sleeping, waking, thinking: of Brad and Frannie. I saw them in my mind, suspended above me, swinging back and forth like a double mobile. But no: it hadn't been that. I knew. It had been the other thing. Frannie and I had talked about it one afternoon—the way we talked, the way we seemed to *have* to talk, about everything. She'd done it a thousand times: the boy from Yale; boys after him; then Marc. She said she liked it. I didn't. It had always made me feel used; cheated; left out, somehow. 'You're doing it all for *them*,' I had said to her. 'What do *you* get out of it?'

That's how it had been that night when, like a fool, I sent her up to get him for anagrams. I wished it had been the other way. It might have been easier to take. I don't know why, but it might have been easier.

Lying there alone, I saw them again. I saw the look on his face; the surprise as he awakened. I saw her head; the back of it, bending forward, and the short, blonde ends of her hair.

And suddenly I was part of it; needed, wanted, had to have what she had given him for my own; but who was there to give it to me if not I, myself?

It wasn't easy. It never is. Love is a two-way, four-way, ten-way thing. Love thy neighbour; love thy lover; love the world. But love thyself, and lose thy soul. Because this isn't, this of all things isn't, this for none of us has ever been all right.

Let it happen, I prayed to nothing I believed in; *let it, let it happen!* And when it did I prayed again: words reaching like a child's arms into swirling darkness: *let it be all right.*

The next morning I left the room to take a shower. Helene and Dick and Brad were already downstairs. I spent an hour stalling before I forced myself to join them. Helene had made a pile of scrambled eggs. She and the men were eating at the kitchen table.

'Well, hello!' Brad said as I came in. 'Welcome back to civilization!'

'Eggs,' I said. 'Look how fluffy.'

'Pot,' said Helene, 'with cream. And you whip them with a beater while they're cooking.'

'How do you feel?' Brad asked.

I glanced up from my plate. 'Fine.'

'Martinis are hell on you,' he said warmly. 'You ought to stick with highballs, Jo. Cocktails always throw you for a loop. . . .'

You bastard, I wanted to cry out. But I just kept on eating my eggs.

After breakfast Helene and Dick went upstairs to pack.

'Don't,' I told them. 'Stay till tonight. I'm okay now; really I am. Don't go.'

I was able to keep them for an extra hour or so, but finally Brad and I drove them down to the station and made our farewells.

I didn't say a word to Brad all the way home. It was only after we'd got inside the front door that I opened my mouth. 'Your turn,' I said.

He looked at me questioningly.

'Your turn to pack,' I said. 'Start now.'

His eyes widened; then his shoulders dropped and he sighed. 'Oh, Jo. Stop being silly.'

'Pack,' I repeated. 'I've had it.'

He stood there, searching my face for its old, reliable forgiveness. 'Listen,' he said, putting his hand on my arm, 'come on in and sit down and let's talk it over.'

I let him lead me into the living-room and we sat down on the couch. 'Don't bother talking,' I said. 'Nobody lives this way for ever. It has to stop some time, and some time is today. Get out and stay out. And this time it's for real.'

My chest tightened and I heard my voice break. *This time it's for real.* What of the other times? Hadn't they 'too been real? once in Washington after a thing with a cousin of mine; and in Denver with a girl from the office; another in a small town in Florida; a fourth in Pittsburgh; a fifth in San Diego. . . . I'd made him leave all those times; but I'd always found out where he was and within two or three days I'd phoned or gone to see him and he'd come home.

'You're crazy,' he said now, sitting beside me. 'You've got it all wrong, Jo. It was nothing.'

'I know what it was.'

'You don't, Jo. Believe me. It was nothing.'

'*I know what it was.* You told everyone. You even sang it. *The Marseillaise*—remember? Subtle, aren't you?'

'Subtle? What are you driving at?'

'You know damned well what I'm driving at. I'm no great disciple of Freud and I'm sick to death of all that crap, but it doesn't take a scientific mind and half a life in Vienna to figure out what a man means when he describes his latest conquest with a blast of *Français*!'

'Oh, Christ—that was only a gag!'

‘Was it?’

He lowered his eyes.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I wasn’t born yesterday. And what’s more, you want me to know. Just dropping the general idea isn’t enough for you. One twisted little way or another you’ve always got to throw in the details. Remember Ann? The one you nicknamed *Lassie*? God, what a clever little gag *that* was. When I finally caught on to what *Lassie* meant I could have gagged my insides out.’

He gave up then. ‘All right,’ he said. ‘So you know. But what you don’t know is Frannie. *She* did it. It was *her* idea. What the hell did I have to do with it? Christ, I’ve been fighting her off for months!’

I tried to laugh but it didn’t come out too well.

‘It’s true, Jo!’ he went on. ‘I swear it is! That time we went to get the soda? I had to park to save our lives! Face it: that sweet little friend of yours knows more tricks than a French whore.’

‘Get out,’ I said.

‘Stop it, Jo,’ he begged. ‘It doesn’t make sense. You’re being hysterical. You know what it’s like for both of us without each other. You’d call, or I’d call, and then I’d be back in a few days.’

‘It’s different this time,’ I said. ‘This time it’s different and I want a divorce.’

‘But it isn’t, Jo! It’s the same old *nothing*!’

‘It’s Frannie,’ I said. ‘That’s what makes it different. I can’t stand having it be Frannie.’ I was beginning to cry.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘You can’t stand having it be Frannie. You couldn’t stand having it be Ann either. She was such a *nice* kid, wasn’t she? And then there was your dear, sweet cousin Kitty: she wasn’t to blame either, I suppose.’

‘No. She wasn’t,’ I told him. ‘She was a child.’

‘Child? She was twenty-five years old! So now Frannie comes along and you’re whitewashing *her*. Why, Jo? Why is it that *they’re* always right? Why aren’t you ever on *my* side?’

‘I’m not on anyone’s *side*!’ I shouted. ‘But you do it to people! You get into people and they’re lost! Up till now I’ve put up with it. But now it’s Frannie—and I can’t bear to have it be Frannie!’

‘Jesus, Jo,’ he said slowly, ‘there are times when I wonder. . . . What the hell are you—queer or something?’

I stopped crying. I stood up and looked down at him. Then I slapped his face so hard it made my palm sting. It took him by surprise. He put his hand up against his cheek and stared at me wide-eyed, like a little boy. Within seconds his own tears brimmed over and trickled down between his fingers.

He left. He took an overnight bag with a couple of shirts and his shaving things. It was all right: he could come for the rest of his clothes later, while I was at Wingo.

I watched him from the front door. He tossed the bag into the back of the car and got in and started the motor. Half-way down the driveway he stopped and leaned out of the window. Seeing me standing there, he smiled. Then he revved up the motor again and, inanely, waved good-bye.

It was mid-afternoon; but I went up to bed. I took a drink with me, and the new *New Yorker*. I couldn’t read, though; and the taste of liquor made me ill. I fell asleep looking at his picture: the one I’d shown Frannie that stood on the bed-table; and the one beside it—the

snapshot of my father: 'You had to go and die of a cold,' I said aloud, ridiculously.

During the evening the phone rang. I knew it was Brad, but I answered it. 'It's me,' he said. 'I'm at Wadsworth Hall in Trent Place. I thought you might want to know. . . .'

I hung up.

The next morning I got up feeling terrible. It was too early to call Wingo; but I reached one of the bus drivers at his home and asked him to tell them I was sick and couldn't come in. Then I went back to sleep and didn't budge till the phone woke me at noon. It was Frannie. 'What's wrong?' she asked. 'I tried to get you at school to ask you to come over this evening. They said you were sick.'

'I am.'

'What's the matter?'

'Oh, I got the curse last night and I wish I were dead.' (Along with everything else, this too had happened.)

'That shows a problem,' she said breezily. 'Lucy Freeman tells about it in her book about her analysis. There's no reason why women should have difficulty with a perfectly normal female function, except if they've got some unconscious problem about it; like, for instance, maybe they don't *like* being a woman; maybe they really want to be a *man*. . . .'

'Oh, shove it,' I said. 'I'm in no mood for humour.'

'What's humorous?' she asked. 'It's an honest-to-God science, and you can't just walk around denying the fact that people live on hidden levels, and——'

My head was beginning to split. I wanted to hang up and go back to sleep. But in a way I was glad to hear from her, pseudo-psychiatry and all. When you're that

much alone any voice sounds good no matter what it's saying. Besides, I knew I'd have to tell her, and the faster the better. 'Listen,' I cut in. 'Shut up for a minute and listen. I hate to give it to you this way, without any advance notice or anything, but——' I felt for a second that I couldn't go on; but I had to. 'Frannie . . .' I tried again, '. . . Brad's gone.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Stop playing, Frannie,' I said, quickly now, wanting to get it over with. 'I know. I know the whole damned thing; about you and Brad. . . .'

The phone seemed to go dead. I'd have thought we'd been disconnected, except for the hum of static in the background; and then, suddenly: the rhythm of her breathing. Knowing she was there, I waited for her to say something. Long seconds went by; and when she did speak, finally, it was only to say, 'Oh, Jo. . . .'

SIX

A COUPLE of hours later her car drove up. I wasn't surprised. I knew she would come. 'The Other Woman,' I said with a bitter-edged laugh.

She didn't smile; or speak.

'Come on, Stanwyck, say something. You're wasting precious film.'

Dropping into a chair she pulled one knee up, bunching her coat, and began chewing on her thumbnail. I walked over to her. I thought for a second she was going to cry. But she couldn't; not with me there. She had told me once: she hadn't even cried when she was little. *I wouldn't give in to my mother*, she had said. I saw the ache in her eyes now; but there were no tears.

'Here,' I said. 'Have a cigarette.'

She shook her head and then lowered it, chin to knees. The afternoon sun slanted through the window on to the blonde ends of her hair. Beneath them the darker roots showed through. It all looked soft and childlike. I wanted to touch it, ruffle it, do anything, anything to let her know that I was glad she had come. But I didn't: because along with that feeling there was another one—of anger and frustration; and had I touched her at all, it would have been to thrash her. 'Okay,' I began. 'Why are you here?'

'To talk, I guess.'

‘Well: talk.’

‘I don’t understand it myself, Jo,’ she said. ‘It’s all mixed up. You know as well as I do: I don’t go in for stuff like this. Before Marc, yes; but never since, and never at all, even before, with anyone who was married. . . .’

‘How valiant of you. What do you want—a citation?’

She leaned forward. ‘Honestly, Jo. You know—my mother got divorced. I was young; but I wasn’t too young to watch, or *feel* what a smashed-up marriage meant. Did I ever tell you this? there wasn’t one damned woman in my whole family who didn’t eventually wind up without her man. None of them made it—not ever. Well, sometimes things like that work out in patterns and keep getting repeated for ever. But other times it can work in reverse—and I always thought the chain would be broken by me: I wanted mine to stick; no fooling around, no looking for trouble. Listen, Jo, you do know, don’t you, that it wasn’t really—well, that it wasn’t really a——’

‘You can skip the details,’ I told her. ‘I know what it was; at least the other night, and the time you went to get the soda.’

‘He spilled that too?’

‘Yes. He spilled that too.’

She stuck her fists against the sides of her head. ‘Oh hell, Jo,’ she groaned. ‘I told you: I don’t know why it happened. It doesn’t add up at all. It’s crazy—and it kills me——’

‘I should think it damned well would,’ I said, ‘what with all those lovely theories of yours about sex versus sexuality and Love and being Whole!’ And then I thought for a minute. It couldn’t be; but I had to ask her anyway: ‘Are you in love with him?’

She looked up, startled. 'God, no.'

My heart sank. Confusedly, incongruously. I had wanted her to say yes. Had she felt deeply for him there'd have been an excuse; something I could understand; forgive. And I wanted to forgive her; I wanted to, desperately. I had lost Brad; not yesterday, but years ago: a hundred times, over and over again. Was I now to lose Frannie too?

'In love with Brad?' she was saying. The idea seemed actually to amuse her. 'Really, Jo—how *could* I be?'

Once more I felt the stab of resentment: if she rejected him, she rejected me. 'Well, if it isn't that, then what is it?'

'It's that he's so——' She tried to laugh, and then closed her eyes tightly against the embarrassment of what she felt to be ridiculous. 'It's because he's so—beautiful.'

The hurt began to dissolve inside of me. It would be all right now. Her admission of his beauty as the cause of her vulnerability was, however shallow to the rest of the world, a peculiar backing for my own enslavement. If Frannie, with all her stress on depth, with all her crack-pot, hell-bound standards of intellectuality, could accept a man whose total vice of failure was mitigated solely by the virtue of his face, then I, too, might be redeemed.

It was like the books she had given me to read and the records she had made me listen to. Let anyone question or disagree: when Frannie laid the seal of her approval on a thing it was, for me, elevated to a level of importance and well worth my own embrace.

It was not merely forgiveness that I felt for her now; it was a sense of the sharing of frailty; but a frailty which, because she too had fallen prey, was sensitive and moving.

The Other Woman, I thought; and smiled. Because,

of all the Other Women in history, from the classics all the way to Hollywood, she was, without guile and glamour, by far the most endearing. And I, the Wronged Wife, seated before her confession, had, oddly, not the slightest wish for bare-clawed retribution. I wanted, almost, to laugh out loud; not derisively, but with love.

'You're a little girl,' I said softly. 'You're a little girl with a crush. . . .'

'Am I . . .?' She lifted her foot to the chair and began pulling at the rip in her moccasin. For a minute there was no sound but the slap of the leather against her toes. 'Where is he . . .?' she asked finally.

'Some dive in Trent Place.'

'Call him.'

'Like hell I will.'

'You've got to, Jo.'

'I haven't got to at all.'

'Please.'

'Please, nothing! I don't ever want to see him again. Nor, might I add, do I feel like ever seeing you again either.'

'You can't mean that,' she said, stricken.

'Oh yes I can. I can and do.' But could I? It was a game I was playing now; and I knew it: a game of hurt-for-hurt's sake. But suddenly she seemed to know it too, and a sixth sense gave her back the advantage. 'Can the Drama, Jo,' she said. 'It's all happened before, hasn't it? I'm merely Number Twenty-five, remember? Why should it matter so much *this* time?'

'I don't know,' I said wavering. 'I just don't know. But maybe it's because this time—it's you.'

'It isn't me any *more*,' she insisted. 'And it won't be, ever again. It's over. Believe me.'

'If it's over,' I said, 'why do you care if he comes back or not?'

'For you,' she answered. 'I care that you have him. In some funny way I kind of *need* for you to have him. And then—for Marc. He doesn't know yet. But if you and Brad split up the whole thing will get around. Even now I think Jeri's caught on. She says when Brad's around I have that Look on my face. You know how it is with this gang: eventually everybody *always* knows. . . .'

'I'll have to think it over,' I said.

She got up then, to go. I walked her out to the driveway. The first snow was on the ground. The slush came up over the sides of her moccasins on to her bare feet.

'You'll catch a cold,' I told her. 'Why can't you dress like a human being?'

She ignored me. 'Call him, will you?' she pleaded. 'Call him as soon as I've gone . . .?'

The sun fell on her hair the way it had before. I put my hand out and touched it. She stepped away from me, flushing. 'Will you call him?' she asked quickly.

'I don't know. If I do, I'll let you know. But anyway, I'm glad you came.' I moved towards her to kiss her good-bye; and, as she had on the night of anagrams, she stiffened and pecked me back like a bird. 'You sure kiss funny,' I commented. 'You certainly kiss funnier than anyone I've ever known!'

She stepped away again and looked me in the eye. 'That's the second time you've done that,' she said.

'Done what?'

'Thought it was funny. The other time you didn't say it; but you laughed.'

'Well, it *is* funny.'

'You——' She hesitated. 'You sort of—puzzle me.'

'*You puzzle me,*' I retorted.

She lowered her eyes and dug her foot deeper into the snow. Then she looked up again. 'Will you ask him to come back?'

'Probably.'

She turned and went to the car. On her way she stopped. 'Do it now, will you? Right *now*?'

I sighed; and then I nodded.

The stiffness went out of her and she grinned. 'Good!' she called. 'And I'm sorry about that kiss,' she added over her shoulder. 'Next time I'll bring my violin!'

I called him. He was home within an hour. 'I need you,' he said.

SEVEN

IN the next few months we saw the Brownes with the regularity of a metronome. While Marc usually left our Bacchanalian revelries for bed at reasonable hours, there were times when Frannie, Brad, and I hung on until dawn. What this routine did to Brad's chances of retention by MacIntyre was something none of us dared dwell upon.

There was one Saturday when we all piled into Marc's station wagon at nine in the morning and drove off for a spree in New York. After a mostly liquid lunch at '21' we did the art world. Fifty-Seventh Street had already begun spewing its treasures about the city and the walking distance between galleries was enough to wear our pumps down to sneakers.

Frannie looked marvellous. In black suede spike heels, a narrow grey skirt and matching cashmere sweater, she was an ad out of *Seventeen*. Slung casually over her shoulders was a nutria coat which seemed to embarrass her inordinately. 'I've only got it,' she explained carefully, 'because my mother made me nag it out of Marc the year we were married. She said even a shop-girl wouldn't be caught dead without a fur coat and that it was essential to teach husbands that wives don't Live Naked Like Fish!'

'It's stunning,' I told her; and she, borrowing the punchline of the joke about the Negress in Bergdorf's,

said, '*It's stunning all right—but do you think it makes me look Jewish?*'

'I'm willing it to Marian Deitz,' she added. 'She needs Worldly Goods to substitute for Lack of Love. Not that nutria would do it. Marian would need wall-to-wall mink; and even then she'd say it wasn't laid right.'

'Will it to me,' I kidded.

'Do you lack love, Jo?' she asked, suddenly serious.

It was fun looking at contemporary pictures with Frannie and Marc. Marc had the combination of a good eye and a knowledge of history. He could spot a phony a mile away and was able to point out derivatives of earlier schools which failed because too little had been added.

What Frannie's pronouncements missed in soundness, they made up for in originality. 'Pure art's gone,' she intoned. 'It gave up its own identity when it started playing Trilby to psychiatry. There aren't any *painting* painters any more. They're all just a bunch of Free Associators stretched out on canvas couches. . . . *And,*' she finished proudly, 'that's absolutely *mine*. I've never read it *anywhere!*'

'We believe you,' Marc said.

Steeped to the ears in culture, we knocked off at four for drinks at the Weylin Bar. Cy Walter was there. He remembered Frannie from other times and played all the things she asked for. There was one she requested twice; and, in a low voice which carried feeling rather than tone, she sang it for us. There were four lines in it which often came (and I suppose always will come) back to me: '*Let me love you. Let me show that I do. Let me do a million impossible things—So you'll know that I do. . . .*'

We had dinner at Nicholson's; and then we braved an icy wind to the Byline Room and listened to Mabel Mercer. Frannie's records, good as they were, had not prepared me for Mabel in person. It was one thing to hear her tears on plastic and another to have them drip on my arm. We had a table directly beneath the wooden platform on which she sat in a straight-backed chair, hands folded in her lap, singing of: the loneliness of ivory towers; the ends of love affairs; mornings of orange juice for One; lucky stars above, but not for her; telephones that ring (but who's to answer?); summer days that wither away too soon, too soon; plans that would have to be changed; farewells (sweet) and amens; and various other sobbing manifestations of the Universal Female Neurosis which seemed to be her stock-in-trade.

We stayed for the last show and then taxied back to the car. Brad, Marc, and I fell asleep and Frannie drove. What with a sudden fall of snow on the Henry Hudson Parkway and a staggering case of myopia, she landed us in Westchester at five forty-five on Sunday morning.

There was something else we owed to the Brownes: an invitation to a party in Meade's Manor given by a couple named Sondheim. The evening had been themed *A Winter Picnic*; and, as picnics go, this was a memorable one. The absence of grassy leas by rippling rivulets or stretches of coral sand was more than made up for by two-inch pile broadloom, the expanse of which, from living-room to dining-room to library, offered ample sitting-space for over eighty picnickers. After a siege of drinking ('Mother of God,' Frannie reported, returning from the bar, 'they've got a separate bartender for each brand!') every couple

was given a small pink damask tablecloth to spread on the floor and two box suppers. These, it was said, had been imported from Chambord via refrigerated truck, and contained, among other homey-type victuals, a stuffed squab and half a lobster.

'What's the Sondheim guy like?' Brad asked Jeri, who was sitting near us.

'Rich,' she answered.

'And not exactly Liberal,' someone else put in.

'—— Liberals!' Frannie roared for the edification of twenty surrounding guests. 'This is the first square meal we've had in years!'

Towards the end of dinner a man named Fred Sitkin played the piano and a girl named Something Harris sang along. She was excellent. Frannie could barely eat. In a while she got up and went over to make a request. It was the same song she'd done herself with Cy Walter at the Weylin Bar. When Mrs Harris came to the lines: *Let me do a million impossible things—So you'll know that I do*—Frannie became rapt enough to stop chewing altogether.

It was interesting to watch Frannie in a group from which she was (or at least kept *saying* she was) trying to break away. It occurred to me that the emphasis she placed on the *difference* between these people and herself was a ruse of the mind: a defence against some deeply-rooted and distorted fear that she was not acceptable. It was not Meade's Manor alone, I decided, which would play upon this insecurity: it could have been South Philadelphia or Sioux City, Iowa: any locale at all, in fact, which, through the ungrounded clichés of society, had been invested with a connotation of homogeneity. Meade's Manor, for that matter, was probably closer to being her

personal *milieu* than any of the others in which she might try to puddle so anonymously.

While this particular dot on New York's map had somehow gained for itself a reputation for hide-bound Jewish conservatism, its younger generation had attempted, just as Frannie had, to break from old beginnings. Though a few of them were, as Frannie put it, *still trying to keep cool with Coolidge*, there were many more who were clearly emancipated.

'They're nice,' I told her during the evening. 'They're smart and interesting and warm and aware. . . .'

'Reverse Racist!' she countered, separating them from me and from herself in one fell swoop. 'The perfect love object for you would be a Crippled Communist Jewish Negro!'

'Why do you come to their parties?' I asked. 'If they're so impossible why don't you forget it and stay home?'

She flushed.

Bill Brecker, an ex-obstetrician turned researcher, overheard us and ambled over. 'Frannie comes to take notes,' he said with a smile. 'One of these days she's going to write a book called *Appointment in Meade's Manor* and immortalize all of us! . . . Have you seen the rest of the house?'

While we were upstairs exploring Frannie came up to freshen her lipstick. 'Ever run into this period?' she asked through stretched lips. 'Authentic Early Mother-in-Law. . . .'

'Love that girl,' Bill sighed when she had left. 'Some day she'll fork over the twenty-five-an-hour and then there'll be no stopping her.'

'Not Frannie,' I told him. 'Frannie's just an oriented spectator. She'll never join.'

'You wait. It's just a matter of time.'

'What makes you so sure?'

'Oh, I know Frannie,' he answered. 'She's an old flame of mine.'

'Really?'

'Really. She was seven and I was nine. We used to live across the street from each other in Chicago and both of us had the misfortune to have nurses. They used to sit together in a little park near the Edgewater Beach Hotel and every now and then they'd go back to Frannie's house for coffee. I don't know why I say *Frannie's* house because it wasn't Frannie's house at all. It, plus everything else, was Frannie's mother's.'

'How do you mean?'

'Oh, I don't know. It was just a feeling you got. She was quite a dame. Pretty as hell and very busy knocking around; she'd just got her divorce. So we'd go up there and she'd be dressing to go out on a date and we'd watch her. We'd watch her watching herself. *Lucy Weatherby*, at her mirror. You know *Lucy? John Brown's Body?* Well, anyway—when she was all done she'd turn around and stand in front of us and say, "How do I look? Tell me how I look, chickens." And Frannie'd get this funny little expression on her face and say, "You look beautiful." And if *I* didn't say anything, she'd push it; you know: "Come on, Billy, don't you think I'm beautiful? Don't you think Frannie's mother is the Cat's Meow?" Well, the truth is: I thought Frannie was a hell of a lot more beautiful than her mother was. I was real sunk when we moved to New York and I couldn't see her any more; because, to me, Frannie was the most beautiful thing that ever lived. But a kid of nine didn't say things like that out loud in those days. Manners. . . . Mothers had to be

Respected. Or maybe that's cover-up stuff. Maybe I kind of sensed how sore she'd be if anyone ever told her her daughter was one up on her. This was a dame who had to *win*, you see. . . .'

Later, when we'd gone downstairs again, I bumped into Frannie at the bar, swapping daggers with Marian Deitz; '. . . and if Jeff *could* afford a swimming pool,' she was saying, 'you'd simply use it to drown yourself!'

'Hey, Fran,' I said, breaking in to forestall bloodshed. 'that Brecker guy is mad for you!'

'Who, Bill?' she asked. '*Love* that man. We were kids together in Chicago. Someday he'll get his head shrunk and then there'll be no stopping him!'

We went soon after that. It didn't take long to find Brad. He was in the kitchen with Mrs Harris, saving George Sondheim and four bartenders the trouble of replenishing the ice-cubes.

EIGHT

It was in the early Spring that the Brownes gave a party of their own: *the* party, as I was later to think of it. I was in on most of the preparations; and since Frannie felt compelled to leave everything for the last day, a storm of organization the likes of which I had never before seen shook the rafters.

We finished working with only an hour left for me and Brad to go home and change; and when we got there I made the mistake of taking a bath; that left Brad waiting, and while he waited he poured himself a beer-mug of martini. By the time I got out of the tub he was lying on the bed trying his damndest to pass out. He had been negative about the party from the very beginning. It bruised his ego, I suspected, to have to face the fact that Frannie and Marc had managed to retain at least seventy-five of their friends in spite of our self-granted priorities on them. 'If you really want to know,' he had said on the way home, 'I don't feel like going back. Who wants to waste an evening on *that* bunch of jerks?'

'Maybe they've invited Mrs Harris,' I said.

'*That* bitch?'

'Oh . . .' I said. 'I gather, then, that the lady was not for yearning?'

'Was that Frannie's?' he asked. 'Most of your *bon mots* these days are Frannie's.'

'It was mine,' I answered. 'There are still a few things left in this world that are mine.' I heard the grate in my voice, though I'd have been hard put to explain exactly what the words meant. *I'm just tired*, I told myself. And I had reason to be. I'd worked like a slave for Frannie—under a weight of responsibility which should far more logically have been the hostess's rather than the guest's. And while I'd often felt her casual domestic incompetence to be one of the many paradoxical facets of her charm, I was getting slightly fed up with playing stand-in. There had been a night a few weeks before when I'd put the kids to bed—which could only be accomplished after I'd sorted out three sets of pyjamas from a mountain of laundry in the basement. And then I'd read to them: one of the Oz books, by special request. Frannie had been reading them Gertrude Stein on the theory that Stein's complexity was actually based on the Absolute of Simplicity. But they'd begun to complain. 'It hasn't got plots,' they said.

In any case, when I found Brad on the bed that evening I wasn't as miffed as I might have been. Let him sleep it off, I figured; and if he wakes up later we'll go.

But he didn't come to; and at about ten the phone rang.

'Where are you?' Frannie wanted to know.

'Brad's out cold.'

'Wake him!'

'I've tried. I get nowhere.'

'Well, come alone.'

'Oh, Frannie, I don't know. I'm pretty beat myself.'

'Now look, Jo, you've just *got* to. There are over half a hundred creeps here already and I can't face it by myself.' I could hear the dull roar of voices in the background; the clink of glasses; and the record player.

'Don't give me that,' I said. 'You're a great hostess when you want to be.'

'I'm not! I'm *afraid* of people! And anyhow, I'm throwing this brawl for *you*—in a way. Isn't your birthday pretty soon?'

'My birthday's in August,' I said, 'and kindly don't remind me of it.'

She was quiet for a second. Then: 'I'll drive over and wake him. I need you both. The whole thing's one-dimensional without you.'

Within twenty minutes her car drove up and she barged in the back door followed by Jeff Deitz. I wasn't surprised that it was Jeff instead of Marc: first of all, she'd had to leave Marc there to carry on for her; and secondly, she had a funny thing about Jeff. In spite of his status as Most Unpopular Camper with many people, Frannie had often spoken in his defence. She had even gone so far as to give him an Italian tie for Christmas; and when Jeri, the Ever-Interested, had asked her why, Frannie had answered with the usual loaded *non sequitur*: 'How would *you* like to be married to Marian?'

Now, half-way up the steps, she turned. 'I have your permission?'

I looked at her. It hadn't occurred to me.

'At this late date, Jo, surely you don't think I'd——' She stopped short because Jeff was there.

I laughed. 'Get him,' I said. 'At this late date, surely I don't!'

'How's it going?' I asked Jeff as we waited.

'Stinks—what else?'

'No fun?'

‘Fun, shmun. I can’t see it. Three cases of liquor, Marc shelled out for. For what? So they’ll get invited back and then owe everybody all over again?’

I fended off his down-beat comments for several minutes, and then Frannie and Brad appeared—Brad all combed and freshened. ‘How’s for Suburban Switchies?’ he suggested gaily. ‘You go back with Jeff, Jo—and I’ll cart Frannie.’

‘Make sure you just cart her,’ I said as we got into separate cars.

‘Oh, Jo,’ Frannie sighed with a laugh. ‘You ought to have your paranoids removed!’

On the way back Jeff talked mostly about his job. ‘What’s all the noise about a guy’s having to own his own business?’ he asked. ‘I’m doing all right. And when things slack off for a month or two it’s not *my* baby; *I* can sleep. I don’t get it: if you don’t run your own show around here you’re sick or something. What I earn is more than nine-tenths of the nation. Is that bad? To hear Marian talk you’d think we were living in the slums!’

‘We’ve all got problems,’ I told him. ‘But when you get right down to basics, Marian couldn’t live without you, and you know it.’

‘That’s what you think!’ he said. ‘Ever notice her at a party? Marian’s a very, very attractive girl. That silver-blond hair of hers is *real*, you know. And so are those *other* two nice things she’s got! You’d be surprised how many solid citizens have called her up in the afternoons to make a pitch. You can say what you want about her, but whatever it takes along *those* lines, she’s got it!’

He was doing the same thing inside of himself that I so often did about Brad: using a thin-skinned, half-baked Pride of Possession to overcome a multitude of sins.

She's a bitch all right, he was saying silently; but she's my bitch. And whatever happens on the side—look at me, fellas, look at me! I'm the guy who takes her home!

We got back to the Brownes' sometime after eleven; and I didn't get much chance to wonder where Brad and Frannie were. Almost immediately I was surrounded by parents. There were two couples with kids I'd recently accepted; and a few more who were thinking of starting and wanted to feel me out on policy and attitude.

When Frannie and Brad did come in I didn't get a chance to talk to her. She simply waved to me on her way to the powder-room.

NINE

SOME weeks later Frannie caught the German measles. There had been a run of it in Meade's Manor and someone had probably brought it to the party.

A couple of days after its inception I left my desk with a volunteer assistant and went to visit Frannie. She was sitting up in bed in one of Marc's clean shirts. The stark whiteness of it played up the grim red rash that covered her face and arms.

'Hi,' I said, tossing her the giant Hershey bar I'd picked up on the way as a Get Well present. 'How are you?'

'Terrible.'

'It's awful with adults,' I said. 'How come you weren't immune? Didn't you ever have it as a child?'

'No. It's one of the few childhood miseries I was spared.'

I sat down on the edge of the bed. 'Is there anything I can do?' I asked. She shook her head and began gnawing at her nails. It made me break inside to see her looking that way: she was so sick, so damned beat. She reminded me of kids I'd had to drive home from school because they'd come down with something. It was their eyes that always killed me. They looked out at you with a kind of startledness, as if somebody had given them a slap they didn't deserve.

'You did call a doctor, didn't you?' I asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Who?’

‘Winston.’

‘Winston? Isn’t he your obstetrician?’

‘Yes.’

I stood up. ‘Why did you call him? Why not Len Perloff’s uncle? He’s your G.P., isn’t he?’

‘Him too. We had to get the letter saying it was German measles.’

I sat down again. ‘What’s it all about, Frannie?’ I asked. ‘What aren’t you telling me?’

She pulled both knees up and put her head down on her arms across them. I could barely hear her. ‘Pregnant,’ she said. ‘Less than three months. You know what can happen to a baby if you have German measles during the first three months? Three out of eight, Winston says: blind, cleft palates, who knows what all else. . . .’

She was pregnant. A strange pang of envy went through me. ‘So he’s going to do an—abortion?’ I asked.

‘Please. The term is *therapeutic* abortion. Like a D & C. Only it’s a D & E: E for ejection.’

‘When?’

‘Tomorrow—if I let him.’

‘If you *let* him? What *else* can you do?’

‘Have the baby.’

‘After what he told you? Are you out of your mind?’

She put her head down again. ‘Jo,’ she mumbled, ‘I’m so mixed up! I know it’s crazy not to let him do it; but it feels like—*murder*. You know what I mean? I mean—if God lets you get pregnant shouldn’t you trust Him to take care of things? I mean if you step in and change His plans like that, isn’t it a—sin?’

‘Really, Fran!’ I exploded. ‘I never thought I’d hear about God from *you*! I never dreamed you had Religion; and certainly not *that* one!’

‘I’ve got it all right,’ she said. ‘And it *is* “that one”. My nurse. I had her till I was eleven, you know. We went to church every Sunday morning. I even got baptized! You know what Cardinal Mundelein said?—*Give me a child until he is seven; then let the world have him.* They had me four years longer than they needed to. It’s in me; not always, but from time to time; and when it hits me it won’t let go. That’s how the whole thing happened in the first place. I mean, a few months ago I started practising—Rhythm. So you see it really *was* in God’s hands. . . .’

‘Holy Christ!’ I said, because I couldn’t think of anything else to say. What more could there be to find in Frannie that I hadn’t known before? How many Frannies were there living beneath that funny little façade? What was she anyway—not just to me, but to herself? Who was she, and where did she *belong*?

‘I couldn’t sleep last night,’ she was saying. ‘I kept having those hellish dreams, waking up over and over. . . .’

‘What dreams?’

‘You know. Those lions. It was terrible. This big cat, this terrible, beautiful, giant *cat*: the kind without a mane; just smooth and sleek and coming at me. And I didn’t back away. I knew it was going to kill me, but I just stood there. It was only when it leaped that I screamed. And the scream stopped it, in mid-air. . . .’

She leaned back against the pillows, mottled red, but pale underneath. Her hands were on the blanket. I laid mine over them but she pulled them away. ‘Look at my nails,’ she said irrelevantly. ‘Why can’t I stop biting my nails . . .?’

The door opened and Marc walked in. 'I dropped in to see the kids,' he said. 'They got there and everything's okay.'

I realized then that they hadn't come home. 'Where are they?' I asked.

'Marian's,' Frannie answered. 'The bus delivered Petey there, and the others took a cab from school.'

'So Bad Mommy comes through in a pinch,' I observed.

'Oh, yes—when it's practical. You never know when *she'll* get sick and have to send hers over *here*.'

Marc unwrapped the Hershey bar and took a piece. 'What's *Bernadette* been telling you?' he asked me. 'All about brimstone and the flaming pits of Hades?'

'Shut up,' she said. 'It's *my* affair.'

'The hell it is,' he told her.

'It's my religion.'

'Oh, is it? If you're so set on going back to God stop kidding yourself and try a synagogue!'

'They wouldn't let me in. . . .' she said.

A while later I went downstairs to make some tea and Marc followed me. 'She's crazy,' he said.

I put the water on and found some tea-bags in a mess of staples in a cupboard over the stove. 'Don't worry,' I said. 'You know Frannie: she has to make a thing out of everything. But when the chips are down she's more realistic than anyone. She'll go through with it. What'll you do for dinner tonight? I could stay and throw something together. . . .'

'Don't bother. I'll manage.'

'I don't mind. I'd like to.'

'No,' he said. 'Honestly. I'd rather be alone.'

But I didn't believe him. 'I'll stay,' I told him. 'I'll stay, and I'll——'

He turned and faced me. 'Go home,' he said. 'For Christ's sake, go home, Jo—to Brad, where you belong!'

'Thanks,' I said, pouring the water into a cup, hearing the clatter it made as I put it on its saucer because my hand was trembling.

'She doesn't need tea,' he said. 'She needs to be—let alone.'

'Thanks for that too.' Then I carried the cup up to Frannie, but she pushed it away. 'I can't keep anything down,' she said, 'and we're all out of sheets and blankets.'

'I'm leaving,' I told her, 'but I'll call you.' I bent to kiss the top of her head. Her hair was flat and dark.

'Don't,' she said, pulling off to the side. 'I'm all sweaty and awful.'

When I told Brad about it that evening his mouth dropped. Then he said, 'Oh, God,' and mixed himself a martini in a twelve-ounce highball glass.

I called the next morning, early, and got Marc. 'She's going,' he told me. 'I'm packing a bag for her.'

Brad was still asleep when I left for school. He'd really hung one on the night before. So I put a pot of fresh coffee on for him and went off in the car. But when I got to the turn I was supposed to make for Wingo I veered the other way.

It took me over forty-five minutes to get to the hospital, and when I did they wouldn't let me up the elevator without a pass.

‘Are you related?’ the receptionist asked. ‘I can’t give you a pass unless you’re related. We were so swamped with visitors they had to make this new rule. It’s better for the patient and——’

‘Yes, yes,’ I cut in. ‘We’re related!’

She nodded. Eyes on the pad, writing out the date and room number in a slow and perfect Palmer Method hand, she smiled. ‘Mother?’ she asked casually.

The blood drained out of me. I wanted to hit her. Instead I grabbed the slip of paper and ran.

I found Marc in the hall, trying to peer behind the curtain of the nursery window. (They had put her in Maternity where she would hear the babies caterwauling night and day and be reminded every minute of her stay that not one of them was hers.) I rushed towards him and he straightened; but he didn’t say hello. Until that moment I had forgotten the thing in the kitchen the night before; put out of my mind the unmistakable rejection: *Go home, where you belong.*

But no, I thought now; *it wasn’t meant that way; it couldn’t have been; we’re all upset—and this is no time to drag up small resentments.* ‘Where is she?’ I asked.

‘Upstairs—twenty minutes ago.’

We went into the waiting-room and sat down. I handed him my pack of cigarettes. I knew he didn’t smoke, but I thought it might relax him. He took one and lighted it; but it went out and he dropped it into an ash-tray. ‘What did you do—cut school?’ he asked after a while.

‘They’ll do all right. I’m not indispensable.’

He smiled. ‘Oh, aren’t you . . .?’

I let it go.

We waited for what seemed to be half an hour and then we got up and went over to the elevators and waited some more. Finally they rolled her out on a stretcher and we followed them into her room. When they had her in bed they left us.

She was still pretty heavily doped; only just beginning to come to. She didn't have her glasses on and when she opened her eyes I saw the greenness, swimming and unfocused. 'They took my ring away,' she said, trying to touch the third finger of her left hand.

'Here it is,' Marc told her. 'They gave it to me while you were upstairs.' He leaned over and slipped it back on. 'How do you feel?'

'D-drunk.'

And then a nurse came in. 'Oh, Mrs Cole,' Marc said.

'Who's that?' Frannie asked, squinting.

'Mrs Cole,' Marc told her. 'I thought you'd better have someone, at least for today and tonight.'

Frannie swallowed. Then, gathering all the force she could, she said distinctly, '*Get her out of here.*'

'Only for a while,' Marc whispered. 'You may want something, and Mrs Cole can——'

'*Get her out of here.*'

Marc looked at Mrs Cole and shrugged. 'I'm sorry, but I guess——'

'It's all right,' Mrs Cole said, patting Frannie's arm. 'You're right. You just take it easy for today and you'll be fine.' As she opened the door to leave we were blasted by the yowling of babies being carried down the hall to be fed by their mothers.

'*Get her out of here,*' Frannie said again.

Marc went over to the bed and took her hand. 'She's gone, Fran. She isn't here any more.'

'Please make her go. Please, please don't let her stay. . . .'

He leaned over her. 'Listen, Fran—she isn't here. She *went*.'

'Out of my room,' Frannie murmured incoherently. 'But what about my life . . .?'

Marc left at noon. He had an appointment to keep; and then he wanted to be at Marian's when the kids got back from school.

I stayed with Frannie all day. I wanted to. It would have been easier for both of us if she had napped; but she fought sleep and kept rambling. I could never be sure that she knew what she was saying, or that she understood me when I answered.

'Don't stay,' she repeated over and over. 'Don't stay, don't stay. I'll be all right. I don't need you. I'm not a child any more. Go away and leave me. . . .'

'I have nothing else to do. Don't worry about me.'

In a while she wanted the bed-pan. I found it in the cabinet by the bed, and began turning the sheets down. 'I'll do it,' she said. 'I'll do it, and you get out.'

'Let me help——'

She pushed herself up on one elbow. 'I'll do it, Jo,' she said, a hot pink flush spreading over her face. 'Get the hell out of here!'

I left and stood in the hall. In a couple of minutes her signal light flashed on. I waited until the floor nurse came and carried it out before I went back in. 'All right?' I asked.

'Yes' (stilted, formally), 'all right.'

'Don't you want to sleep now?'

'No. I do not want to sleep now.' Then, less formally: 'I don't want to sleep while you're—awake. . . .'

'I can read,' I said. 'I'll get a magazine from the waiting-room. I'll——'

'Why is it all so complicated, Jo?' she broke in.

'Why is what so complicated?'

'Oh, the simplest things . . . like breathing; like moving from one end of a day to one end of a night; like looking out of a window, or walking through a door; like having somebody try to be kind to you. Shouldn't it all be easier? I mean, there *are* people who do find it easier, aren't there . . .?'

'If you mean do I think life is a bowl of cherries, the answer is No. But we're all going to live it anyway, and there's no point in——'

'I don't mean life. That's too big and too vast. I mean a minute, say; or an hour. That's not too much, is it?'

'Too much for what?'

'Too much to take for granted? Like may be it's raining out. Aren't there any people who can wake up and see it's raining out and say, "Okay, it's raining out and to hell with it——"?''

'Try to go to sleep.' I walked to the bed, bent over her, and straightened the sheet. Unexpectedly, she raised her hand and, with her index finger, followed, gently, the line of a scar running from my cheekbone to my chin. It was a thin scar, grown faint with the years, about which I had long since lost my self-consciousness. With pancake or just powder, it was barely visible. But that day I had worn no make-up.

'How did you get it?' she asked softly; and I knew immediately that she had been aware of it for months.

'Ages ago,' I answered. 'It's nothing.'

'But how?'

'Oh—on a beach, when I was a kid. I—fell.'

'What an unexciting way,' she said, 'to get something so—beautiful. . . .'

I stepped back and covered it with my hand. 'That's not funny,' I said. 'That's just not funny at all!'

'Funny?' She closed her eyes. 'You think I'm trying to be funny? It's one of the most—beautiful things about you. But you don't believe me. When I say a thing with all my soul—you don't believe me. . . .'

I turned away and sat down in the armchair. 'Sometimes,' I said, 'it's hard to.'

'You know something, Jo?' she asked.

'What?'

'I love you. I really do. Do you know I do?'

'Of course. I love you too. But go to sleep. Try to get some sl——'

'I don't want to. When I sleep I have those lousy dreams: all full of lions—without manes. They're so big and so beautiful and they come at me and they want to love me; but they leap, and I scream, and they're stuck—in mid-air.'

'I know,' I soothed. 'But you're tired. Try to rest——'

'N-no . . . ' she struggled. 'No: you don't know. You don't know anything. That's the crazy thing about you, Jo: you don't know things.'

'What things?'

'*Things*. You act so smart, and everybody thinks you're so bright. Well . . . you're dumber than anyone most of the time. But I love you anyway. . . . You know, Jo, that I love you any——'

'Stop it,' I said firmly. 'Stop it and go to sleep.'

'No; don't make me,' she pleaded. 'Let me say it. Let me say that I do.'

I thought of the song then: the one she was always requesting; and sitting there by her bed, I tried to remember the words. It wasn't hard. It consisted of a series of short, straight sentences; the music was only incidental:

*Let me love you.
Let me say that I do.
If you'll lend me your ear
I'll make it clear
The way that I do.
Let me whisper it.
Let me sigh it.
Let me sing it, my dear,
Or I will cry it.
Let me love you.
Let me show that I do.
Let me do a million impossible things
So you'll know that I do.
I'll buy you the dawn if you'll let me love you
today.
And tomorrow
I'll send you merrily on your way.*

That night at home Brad wanted to know everything. He'd skipped work and had spent the day reading and puttering around with the furnace. 'I felt so awful,' he said.

'All right,' I told him. 'She's perfectly fine. And,' I added, watching him mix another of those twelve-ounce martinis, 'you'd better get to the office tomorrow. You're going to get fired; I swear you are.'

'Don't kid yourself. They need me.'

'That's what you think.'

'Why is it,' he asked, 'that you *always* have to tear me down?'

'I'm not tearing you down!' I barked. 'I'm just telling you: if you don't start giving them their money's worth, you're going to get canned. And it just so happens I'm not in the mood to move again!'

'Of course not,' he said quietly. 'How could we move again? How could we possibly live without Frannie Browne . . .?'

'What have you got against Frannie?' I asked angrily.

He took a swig of martini. 'We're fighting,' he said. 'What are we fighting about? We've been fighting all year, you know that, Jo? Ever since we met the Brownes we've been having trouble.'

'We've been having trouble for twenty-three years.'

'Yes—but not the same kind. Now it's—I don't know. It's different.'

I got up and went into the kitchen for a glass. When I came back I poured part of his drink into it for myself. 'You ought to call her,' I said. 'Or go see her.'

His face set hard. 'Do you mind if I don't?' he asked. 'Why the hell are you always pushing me off on Frannie? Have you got a spare husband somewhere? Why are you always giving me *away*?'

I stopped talking; and when my glass was empty I went upstairs.

He followed me. 'Come on, Jo,' he said, putting an arm around my shoulders. 'I take it all back, okay? Come on.'

'All right,' I said. But it didn't work. It never did when I felt like that. I ended up hating him; hating myself.

And I couldn't fall asleep for hours, thinking about Frannie.

When I got to the hospital next morning she was sitting in the armchair. She was wearing a pretty plaid robe she'd got in Bermuda with the collar of a clean pyjama top folded over the neck. Her rash was all gone. She'd put on some orange lipstick and her hair was brushed and shining.

'How are you?'

'Fine,' she said. 'I can go home the day after tomorrow—if I want to.'

'Don't you want to?'

'I don't know. It's sort of nice here: meals served, sheets changed; what more can you ask? It'd be heaven if they'd put me on another floor. Hearing those babies all the time gets me down, sort of.'

'Oh, cut it out,' I said. 'You've got three. Isn't that enough?'

'No,' she answered, 'I guess it isn't. I don't know how many would be enough. I love babies. My own, anyway. I love to hold them. I can sit around for hours and hours, just holding them. We had a nurse for Stu for eight weeks because I was new at it; and Petey was a preemie so they kept him here, boxed up for five weeks. But I had it with Blair. She didn't know what a crib was till she was five months old. I put her in a basket and carried her all over the house with me so I could be near her and pick her up and hold her in my arms. Even at night we had the basket in the room. I didn't breast-feed her because I couldn't keep the milk coming, but when I gave her a bottle I did it with my clothes off so she'd be close and get the warmth.'

I used to feel as if my love were osmosing, kind of: from me into her; and I wondered how it made her feel. Sometimes, wondering like that, it almost seemed as if she were me and I were loving myself. . . .’

The telephone rang. It was Jeri. Marian had told her.

A few minutes later it rang again: Marian.

Then a third ring: Jeff.

I waited for a fourth ring: from Brad. But it didn’t come.

Frannie went home three days later. She could have left before; but she loved that little room. It offered, I suppose, an insulation against the world outside, and everything unknown to me, that was bothering her.

TEN

A WHOLE month went by before I reached the big blow-up with Henry Bradford.

It happened on a Sunday evening after dinner. We had nothing to do because the Brownes were at the Weinricks', along with the Deitzes and Perloffs. 'She's well enough physically,' I was saying to Brad, 'but she's so damned quiet most of the time. She hasn't mentioned that Church business again, but I think it's really eating into her. You never know with her: there's so much going on inside you can't even begin to sort it all out. . . .'

'Who are you?' he asked. 'Her psychoanalyst?'

'Her friend.'

'If you're her friend, quit trying to dissect her. German measles—a kid's disease, and everybody acts like Hiroshima or something.'

'German measles,' I said, 'but under the circumstances a rather cruel blow of fate, I'd say.'

'Yeah?' He let out a long sigh. 'Well, maybe. But you know what? It's an ill fate that blows nobody good.'

'What do you mean?'

He sighed again. 'Jo, old girl,' he said, 'ever since the day I met you you've been making me feel like an A-One Nothing. But the fact is: you're stupider than anybody.'

'That's not true,' I argued. 'I *don't* feel that way about you, and I can't see why you have to keep feeling that way about *yourself*! There have been times for us when—well, you know what times. Nobody's had it the way we've had it, Brad; just nobody. You know how it's——'

'Sex,' he said, nodding. 'You do things great with sex, Jo; but even then—you're on top.'

'Can the Male Chauvinism,' I told him. 'What difference does it make who's where and how as long as it works the way it does?'

'Ever hear of *levels*?' he asked. 'You must've heard of levels before. Your little friend Frannie is very hot on what level a thing seems, or means, or is. Well, I think if a thing works all right, maybe that's *one* level, and it's fine. But you know something? I've got a feeling there are some other levels around, and those little levels may not be working at all. . . .'

'Listen,' I said, 'please don't start giving me *that* bull. I get more than enough of it from Frannie.'

'You think it's bull?'

'On a couch,' I said, 'where you're paying for it, with a trained person behind you who knows what it's all about? No: there it isn't 'bull. But with Frannie who'd part with her right arm before she'd learn it the real way? Yes: the kind of thing Frannie throws around free, for the fun of it—is bull!' I was expecting a debate: a Brad-type debate in which I'd wind up flailing at vague, bodiless clouds. But this time I didn't get one. This time he said, 'Okay by me.' And the silence, somehow, was harder to take than the noise.

We sat there for a while, trying to drink ourselves out of it. And then I thought of Frannie and the things she had tried to tell me in the hospital while she was still

doped up and could barely get the words out. 'What did you mean,' I asked Brad suddenly, 'about my being—stupid?'

'It was fate all right,' he muttered. 'That little job that doctor did on her might just have been the luckiest thing that ever happened.'

'Why?'

He drained his glass. 'Because,' he said blurrily, 'all things considered, and all things—well, *considered*—it might just've been—and mind you, I say *might* just've been—that we'd never have known . . . whose it was.'

'You mean, then,' I said, with a new, incredible, and terrible calm, 'that it hasn't been "all over" after all. You mean that in believing it would "never happen again" I've been wrong. You mean also, *too*, along with *that*—it's not for peanuts any more. *Now*, you mean to tell me, it is all and everything. . . .'

'Once,' he said. 'Only once; and even that it was—well, there's no point in going into that. . . .'

'Go into it,' I told him.

'No,' he said. 'It's details. You always make me feel *bad* when I give you—details.'

It's funny how it is when you decide a thing is finished. It's funny how a decision isn't a decision all by itself, separate, or sudden; how *now* is always built on *then*; and how nothing ever exists without holding, right there inside of it, making it whole, the thousand other things which existed before it. So—why did I decide that night? I didn't. That night was simply the point in time when all those other times cohered and made the whole. And I was calm, because that too comes with decisions. It's only the piling-

up and the moving-towards which cause all the clamour. The actual decision hardly makes a sound.

I didn't go to bed that night. I waited till Brad had; and then I went up and looked through everything I owned. Finally I packed a sweater and skirt; some blouses; a sequined dirndl and the top that went with it; a week's worth of underwear; and some other things—things I didn't really need but couldn't bear to leave behind: a clay turtle a little girl at Wingo had made for me; the white cigarette cup Frannie had given me for Christmas; and the framed snapshot of my father.

By the time I was finished the sun was out. Brad was still asleep and I was glad he was: I wouldn't have to talk to him; or listen to the protestations I'd heard so many times before; or see him cry; or cry myself. I could just stand beside the bed with its sheet and blanket kicked aside and look at him, sprawled out and smooth-skinned like something from the sea: not human, or even animal—but a giant sleeping plant which, with its beauty alone, could lure its victims to destruction.

'Good-bye,' I whispered; and after all those years of hate and love, and hope and hate, and love and hate and hope again—it seemed that simple.

ELEVEN

I DROVE off slowly, not wanting to wake him with a bumping exit down the unpaved driveway; and I kept on carefully even after I'd come to the road. Reaching a village, I stopped at an early-opened drug store for a cup of coffee and broke my only five-dollar bill. Where could anybody go on four eighty-five? I would have to borrow; but from whom? I don't know how or why I thought of Frannie; though, actually, it wasn't so strange: *there was no one else.*

The house was quiet. Marc and the kids had left; and Frannie, per usual, was back in bed sleeping away another morning. I stumbled up the stairs, hitting my elbow a nasty crack on the banister. I stood outside her door a minute, rubbing my arm, trying to catch my breath. Then, without knocking, I whammed it open.

She shot up like a spring. 'Jo! What is it?' She had slept naked and she pulled the sheet up and held it over her breasts, staring at me, bewildered. Then she bent down and fished her glasses out from underneath the bed. 'What is it?' she asked again. 'What's happened?'

They used two double beds. I walked past hers and threw myself across Marc's, face down. We were quiet for a second. Then I raised up on my elbow and peered

at her. She was soft in the dim light that came through the draperies, drawn always against the morning sun. I saw the sweep of her neck, her shoulders, and the curve of her breasts where the sheet began. She seemed so young: ten years younger than she was; aeons younger than I. And small; very small in the big, big bed; small enough to be lifted, carried, buffeted, blown away. But it was the look of innocence that got me: oh, how innocent she seemed; innocent of all things, but mostly, of herself. *What right has she to be this way?* I thought, senselessly, foolishly, wanting to scream. *What right has she, at this ugly moment, to be beautiful?*

All touch with control was drowned in a wash of envy; or impotence. 'I know the whole damned thing,' I told her raggedly. 'I know what's gone on; and I know why you betrayed that holy God of yours and let them take the baby!'

I heard the intake of breath; and the long sigh, 'You're right about the first thing, Jo. But you're dead wrong about the second. If he let you believe it, about the baby, he was only hurting you more than he had to.'

'You'd never know!' I said. 'How could you ever be sure?'

'I'm sure all right. There was a thing, Jo; but not what you think. Don't make me talk about it; please don't; I can't. Just believe me; will you please believe me?'

'Believe you!' I said. 'I may be dumb, Frannie. But not that dumb. Why should I ever believe you again?'

'No reason,' she answered. 'No reason in the world that I can think of; except——'

'Except *what?*' My voice was rising; I couldn't seem to keep it down.

‘Except that—— Oh, God, how can I tell you? It’s too insane. . . .’

I got up and came around to her side of the room. I stood there beside her bed, towering over her. I wanted to rip the sheet off and beat her. But I couldn’t.

She turned her head away and hugged the sheet even closer. ‘Except that I love you,’ she said simply.

I began to laugh.

‘I know,’ she went on. ‘It doesn’t make sense. It never has, right from the beginning. It’s so crazy: how can you do a thing like that to somebody you love? It’s weird, Jo; it’s scary. You’d think I didn’t love you at all. You’d think . . . I *hated* you. . . .’

I kept on laughing; and then suddenly I knew I wasn’t laughing: I was crying. I was crying so hard I couldn’t stop. There were sobs I’d never heard before breaking out around my fist against my teeth. I couldn’t stand up any more and I fell across the foot of her bed and tried to hold it back, biting the fist, but it wouldn’t work.

She got up then, the sheet still swathed around her, took some shorts and a shirt that lay heaped on a chair, and went out of the room.

I must have stayed there an hour. When finally I got downstairs I found her dressed and washed and freshly lipsticked, sitting at her desk in front of her typewriter. But there wasn’t any paper in it. There hadn’t been any paper in it since the Fall. ‘I guess you can begin now,’ I said. ‘That crazy little novel you once talked about; that crazy little plot you were waiting for? You’ve got it now, haven’t you?’ I wasn’t crying any more. My voice was flat and feelingless.

She smiled, ruefully, and shook her head. 'Not yet,' she answered. 'Not quite yet. . . .' Then, quickly, she got up. 'I made some breakfast,' she said. 'You know my cooking—but it's better than nothing. . . .'

She was gone a while. When she came back she was carrying a tray. Besides coffee for both of us she had made scrambled eggs and buttered toast. There were sprigs of parsley stuck into the centre of the eggs and a little moss-green bowl filled with orange marmalade. 'I hate marmalade,' she said, 'but I love the colour.'

The coffee tasted like dish-water, and the eggs needed seasoning. 'You're a lousy cook,' I said, 'but you have a way of making things look pretty. . . .'

I was still there that afternoon when the kids came home; and there at six when Marc arrived. I don't know how or when it was decided that I would stay (I had, after all, only come to borrow some money), but it was something both Frannie and I seemed to know and accept. I couldn't borrow indefinitely; nor could I have swung a hotel bill on my salary. Besides, I wanted less than anything to be alone.

When Marc came in Frannie told him I was going to be there for a while. He stood in the den for a few minutes, not saying anything. But his withdrawnness was not new. There had always been that reserve in his manner, the restraint, the not wanting to be part of things. While Frannie might set the world on fire at any given moment, *or* plunge it into utter darkness with as little effort, Marc was the Cool, the Constant, the Collector of the Pieces.

'Where?' he asked finally. 'I hardly think we're set up for long-term guests.'

'Oh, not long-term,' she told him. 'Just till things get

settled—or blow over,’ she added hopefully. ‘We’ll clean out the maid’s room; hang pictures and stuff. . . . Jo, you pick a couple of pictures you’d like.’

‘Spare me the Rouault, if you don’t mind,’ Marc said. But, again, his resistance to the spirit Frannie had just shown was—well, was Marc; and so: unhurtful.

I chose one from the breakfast-room: orange free squares on a white background, painted by Blair in nursery school some years before. And Frannie gathered some white and yellow flowers from outside and put them in a vase on my bed-table.

There was a moment, after dinner, when I felt I had better go. I was in the den picking up glasses and ash-trays and I could hear them talking in the kitchen: ‘. . . left him because of *you*. . . .’ Marc was saying, ‘. . . and living here strikes me as sheer insanity!’

He knew, then. Either he had been told, or he knew instinctively.

‘. . . nowhere else to go,’ Frannie insisted. ‘And anyway, it’s just a month or so; we leave for Bermuda when school ends.’

‘Nowhere else to go, *hell*,’ was Marc’s rejoinder. ‘Stop kidding yourself. She wants to stay and you want her to stay and *nowhere else to go* has nothing to do with it!’ But then: ‘All right: you play it your way. But just remember: I live here too and I’m not going to put up with any of your—’

I coughed before I went in. The conversation stopped like a snapped-off radio. ‘Look,’ I began, ‘I think I ought to leave—’

‘Don’t be an idiot,’ Frannie said.

‘No, really. There’s the food and everything, and

‘What would you like to do? Stick a quarter a day in the meter or something?’

‘Be serious, Frannie. It isn’t only the room and board. It’s the trouble. You don’t even have a steady maid——’

‘If I don’t have a maid it’s *my* problem,’ she said. ‘You know we could afford a whole retinue if we wanted it. I don’t have a full-time maid because I can’t stand having them around, breathing down my neck. I know; I’ve tried. The last one wound up thinking she was my mother!’

She was standing beside me at that point, with Marc across from us. I sensed for a second that our positions might be symbolic; that sides were being taken. Yet I didn’t, and don’t, believe that all of life must be broken down to fit the honeycomb of unconscious motivation; so I put the thought from my mind. ‘All right,’ I said. ‘But the booze is going to be on me. And the butts. And anything else I happen to notice you can use around here.’

‘Okay,’ she agreed. ‘But only because it will make *you* feel better.’

That first night at the Brownes’ was one of the hardest—though there were to be worse ones before our month was over. Marc was tired, and, for some reason, insisted that Frannie go up with him. He said, lightly enough, that he couldn’t stand female *klatsches* and that we’d have lots of time for cahootzing when he wasn’t around.

I stayed downstairs for a while, drinking to keep from thinking. But I thought anyway. And mixed with the dread of failure and loneliness I might eventually have to face there was a kind of elation. Because now, at long

last, I was about to scrap the past and start over. I'd go back to school the next day and continue till the end of the term. In my free time I'd find an apartment for when Frannie and Marc and the kids went to Bermuda; and I'd haunt the agencies in town for a summer job with decent pay. I'd had a variety of experiences: Wingo, secretary, training squad in a department store, even a slight tussle with hospital work in the old days. There was no doubt that I could land something.

I poured another drink, and for twenty minutes or so I was absolutely happy.

When I got upstairs the kids were asleep and I went into their rooms to look at them. They were so beautiful, all three of them, each in his own way: Stuart—the biggest, already broken from the confines of the family to a point of relying on a place within himself; yet, in sleep, the traces of small-boy vulnerability on his face; a look of needs as yet unfilled; because Stu had been the first to come and his row had been hardest. Petey—flung carelessly on the bed beside Stu's, with the half-smile of less complicated dreams. And in another room, papered with rosebuds and billowing with organdie—Blair. I stayed with her longer than with the others, taking in her delicate, upturned nose, her hair streaked blonde like Frannie's, but straighter and softer in its sleep-loosened pony tail. And looking at her, I thought: *she might have been mine.*

When I left her there was silence behind Frannie's and Marc's door, and no light showing through at the threshold.

I went to my own small room down the hall and hung my unpacked things away. *It won't be bad*, I told myself.

It's nice here. I emptied a fresh pack of cigarettes into the white cup Frannie had given me and set it on the table beside the snapshot of my father. She'd forgotten an ash-tray, but I didn't want to go downstairs again so I used the soap-dish from the john.

I lay in bed a while, smoking and staring at the ceiling. But repeatedly my glance swept sideways to the snapshot. Like a child alone with an image or a picture in a story-book, I spoke to it inside myself: *I'm here*, I said. *No, not with Brad; just me. It had to be this way. I think you must have known it years ago: perhaps, the week before I married him. . . . Did you hear about Mother? She wasn't alone for long. No one we ever knew: a banker from Detroit. Yes. I had a letter, ages ago. I can't remember if I answered. If I did it was probably about the weather or a dress I'd bought. It was always like that. We were never able to say anything that mattered. I don't think she ever got used to having me: such a brash child for such a quiet little woman to have borne. . . .*

His thin, leaning height touched me; and the sad, grey depths of his eyes. I had always loved his face. Its fragile unsmilingness had not seemed sad to me in those days; only filled with understanding. Whatever there had been in it of its own weak end I had overlooked, putting there instead the thing I wanted most for him to give me.

Lying there then, I remembered things about him, times I'd had with him that I hadn't thought of for years: a beach scene when I was twelve. He'd carried me to the water on his shoulders. *Don't*, my mother cautioned. *She's too heavy; you'll hurt yourself.* (She sat on a blanket on the sand, in the shade of a yellow and green umbrella, with a robe across her lap to protect her from the wind.)

Don't, she said again. But he walked off with me, bending slightly under my weight, not listening. Just before we reached the water, he fell. I landed on a shell and cut my cheek. It grew together, but the scar stayed.

And then there was the time, much later, during my first vacation from college. I'd been out on a date, dancing, and drinking something home-distilled. After that we'd driven off somewhere and parked the car. I didn't get home till three. I took my shoes off to creep upstairs, but when I passed the dining-room he heard me. He was in there, reading. He looked up. He didn't ask me to stop or stay; but I had to. I walked into him, carrying my shoes like a fool, and stood there. There wasn't any need to explain. He knew those things about me without having to be told; and he accepted them. Still: *I'm sorry*, I said inanely. *I hope you didn't worry*. . . .

And then my mother came down, stern and tight-lipped. She looked at me; then at him.

It got late, I told her. *I didn't know how late it was getting*.

You smell like a gin mill, she said.

I swallowed and put my hand over my mouth.

Your clothes look as if you'd slept in them.

Trembling, I smoothed the creases down against my leg.

Where were you? What were you doing?

I couldn't answer. I looked at my father.

She folded her arms across the breast of an old silk wrap. Then: *It's all right with your father, Elizabeth*, she said, ice-edged. *Anything you do is all right with your father!*

Speak! I cried out to him inwardly, silently. *Say something! She's right, she's right! Shout at me, blame me, beat me—and I will love you even more!*

But he didn't move, or utter a sound. He just turned the page and went on reading.

I'm sorry, I said to the picture, reaching out and turning it away.

There was a knock on my door.

'Yes?'

'Me: Frannie. Can I come in?'

She was wearing white pyjamas, striped red and navy.

'I thought you were asleep,' I said.

'No. Can't. How are you?'

'Fine.'

'Are you all right?'

'Fine.'

She took a cigarette out of the white cup and lighted it.

'Oh, you brought that along. . . .'

I sat up. 'Listen, Frannie,' I said, 'I've been thinking. Maybe I shouldn't be here. I mean—well, after all, it's a little crazy. And Marc doesn't seem to be going for it wholeheartedly.' I laughed. 'He knows the ropes, you see—being a lawyer. How will it hold up in court that I'm living in the home of the co-respondent?'

'Court? You're not——?'

'Eventually, I guess. But not till I get settled. Maybe next Fall. And, anyway, it won't be that kind: no scenes, no fuss, no names.'

She bit her lip. 'It *is* crazy, isn't it?' she said. Then she pulled herself up and looked straight at me. 'Why aren't you angry at me, Jo?' she asked.

'I was, this morning. And in the past, from time to time, I've been a little miffed, to say the least.'

'No. Not like that. Not in the past, and not just a little.'

Why aren't you angry *now*? Why aren't you tearing the house apart? Why don't you want to kill me?"

"I don't know," I said. "Why do you want to be killed?"

She didn't answer. *Poor kid*, I thought. *Poor tortured kid*. I put my hand out. "Come here, jerk," I said.

She came over slowly and I drew her down. "Go back to bed," I told her, kissing her on the forehead. She pulled away. "And for Christ's sake," I added, letting her go, "don't start *analysing* everything! We've got enough to handle without any half-baked psychiatry!"

"But Jo," she said, "you've *got* to be angry! It just isn't normal! It isn't right——"

I laughed.

"Go on, laugh," she said. "Laugh—and then maybe you won't have to be honest about how angry you are!"

"Okay," I said. "So I'm angry. If it'll make you happy, I'll absolutely *roar*! *I'll eat you alive*! All right? Now go to bed and forget it, will you?"

I felt pretty good after she left; but I couldn't sleep, and I suppose lying there thinking is what did it. A kind of hopelessness set in which had been only superficially disguised by my attempt to cheer up Frannie. It got worse as the hours went by and I started crying again. Once I began, it exploded, the way it had in Frannie's room that morning; and I had to bury my face in the pillow to keep from waking the world.

TWELVE

THE next morning I was downstairs by seven and made breakfast for Marc and the kids. Everybody was ecstatic about the French toast with syrup and the bacon. 'We're really living!' Stu said; and Marc had two cups of coffee. Frannie floated around vaguely for a while and finally went upstairs again.

We all left the house at the same time, and I pulled off my chores at Wingo as if nothing had happened.

After school I drove to the city and tried two employment agencies. The woman at the second one seemed to think my chances were good. She did have a suggestion, though, after reading the resumé I wrote out for her: 'You don't have to say forty-six,' she told me. 'Make it forty. It's safer.' I resented having to, but I wrote it all over again so there wouldn't be any trace of an erasure.

On my way back that evening I stopped at an H & H and ate a chicken pot pie. I didn't feel like dessert, but I ordered half a dozen cup cakes and wrapped them up in napkins for the kids.

'Where were you?' Frannie wanted to know when I walked in. 'We've been waiting and the damned steak's overdone.'

'I should have called you. I grabbed a bite *en route*. Here, divide them,' I said, handing the cup cakes to Petey.

'Not before dinner!' Frannie shouted; but it was too late; tremendous bites were missing before she could get across the room.

'Jo gave us them,' Petey said, crumbs spilling to the floor.

'You know you're not supposed to eat sweets before dinner. It's one of the few-and-far-between rules around here!'

'Jo gave us them,' he repeated.

'Listen!' she told him, as the others stood by looking apologetic, but continuing to munch. 'When you crayoned on the walls did I stop you? When you took my records over to Bootsie Shea's house and their baby vomited all over them did I punish you? Did I give you hell when you melted five pounds of modelling wax in the oven without a pan? No! Why? You were expressing yourselves! Where else can you get freedom like that? *But you can't ruin your appetite before dinner.* When I do the cooking, I'm not going to end up throwing everything into the garbage can!'

'She's sore,' Petey explained to me.

'Yes. I'm sore!'

'Jo's not sore,' he said quietly.

She squared her shoulders and glowered at me. 'Look,' she said, 'I know they don't stress food at that Cannibals' Kindergarten you work for; but around *this* place nobody ruins their appetite before dinner. Get it?' She paused. 'I mean—nobody ruins *his* appetite,' she added.

I sat with them through dinner. Marc hacked away at the steak for a while and then gave up. 'I told you not to put it in so early,' he said.

Frannie looked up stonily. 'For ten years you've been yelling because I'm always late. So now I do something early and that's no good either!'

'Oh, Jesus,' he sighed. 'What has putting a steak in the oven at the right time got to do with getting to theatre in the middle of the second act? Or missing planes, for God's sake?'

'A lot,' she told him. 'It's *precisely* the same kind of thing in the unconscious, and you're just being negative. You're *resisting* me! Why do you have the need to *resist* me?'

'Face it,' he said. 'There are times when you're totally resistible.'

'It was my fault,' I told Frannie as we did the dishes. 'If I'd called you wouldn't have waited and the steak would have been fine. Why didn't I tell him that? It was my fault.'

'Yeah,' she said. 'You tell him. Go tell Christ Judas was innocent!'

'Oh, stop it. You're madly in love with the guy!'

'Well, of course I am!' She looked up, aghast at my *naïveté*. 'You *have* to be madly in love with him to be in love with him at *all*!'

I thought about that later, and I decided that she had it the wrong way around. It was far more likely Frannie herself with whom you had to be madly in love to even put up with her. And yet, so many people did. It wasn't just people like Jeri either—who kept Frannie's phone busier than a switchboard inviting her to things, asking for opinions, pouring, pouring, pouring into a willing ear; or like Marian, pledged by some strange and vengeful umbilical vow to keep coming back for more. It was others: like that marvellous milkman, for instance, who

rearranged the ice-box every time he came so that the new milk would be in the back and the older milk up front. And the delivery boy from the butcher's who put the meat into the basement freezer. And the man from the diaper service. I never saw him because he belonged to another era; but I heard about him. One day he changed Petey's diaper to get it into the outgoing load while Frannie played him a record of 'Summertime', which was his favourite song. . . .

Well, maybe I'm wrong about their having been in love with her. Maybe it was just the funny feeling she gave you that made you want to take care of her.

And, of course, it wasn't that way with everyone. There were people in Meade's Manor who had their reservations about her; and those others I mentioned earlier who had met her through Wingo and written her off as America's Number One Oddball. To say nothing of Marian, bondages notwithstanding, who, if she'd ever found Frannie burning in Hell, would have tossed her a can of kerosene to keep things going.

'How are you?' she asked me that same evening of the steak fight, when Marc had left us in the den and gone upstairs. It was a question I was getting used to.

'Fine.'

'You're not too—lonely?'

'Don't be silly.'

She pulled a bottle out of the cabinet and I got the ice and soda. When the drinks were mixed she stretched out on the couch. I took the big beige chair, kicked off my shoes, and drew my knees up. It was one of Frannie's poses; but it belonged to a mood rather than to an age.

'It's important to you,' she said.

'What is?'

'Oh, you know. It isn't going to be easy for you without—a *man*. Some women don't care, but with women like us——'

'I'll manage.'

'Will you?'

'Of course.'

'Do you know anybody? Some nice, sweet guy floating around loose anywhere?'

'My God, Fran!' I said. 'Give me a little time! The body isn't even cold yet!'

'There's Bill Brecker,' she went on. 'That doctor you met at the Sondheims'. You know—I told you: we were friends when we were kids in Chicago. He's really a love, and Jeri told me she heard he's getting a divorce.'

'What's wrong?'

'Who knows? His wife wasn't there that night. I guess they were already separated.'

'Do you know her?'

'Briefly. Quite attractive—but a Food Chain heiress, and it couldn't have been too easy for a twelve-grand-a-year researcher to handle a set-up like that. Altruistic M.D.s don't look too hot driving around in Cadillac convertibles their wives have paid for. But listen: he's *so* nice, and you know it takes a certain amount of guts to give up the plush life for a one-room apartment and an Idea. I could call him up and ask him over for dinner!'

Her impatience to get me bedded down struck me as slightly over-emphasized, if generous. I lowered my knees and crossed my legs. 'Look,' I said firmly, 'just drop the whole subject. It's my problem and I'll take care of it. Why do *you* have to come to my rescue?'

She drained her glass and set it down on the floor. Then she lay back on the couch again and closed her eyes. 'Because it was I,' she answered slowly, 'who did it to you.'

'That's ridiculous!' I exploded. 'You did *nothing* to me! *He* did it to *you*! I told you a long while ago, didn't I? You're Number Twenty-five! He had it all worked out in his head the minute he laid eyes on you that first night at Wingo! You had about as much chance of beating that gun as a sitting duck! Stop blaming yourself!'

'I'm responsible,' she said.

'You're not!'

'Oh, yes: I am.'

And then the door opened and Marc stood in it, clutching an old bathrobe about him. 'What are you two going to do?' he asked. 'Flap your gums all *night*?''

'We're not flapping our gums,' Frannie answered. 'We're *talking*.'

'You're talking all right. Don't you ever let up?'

'Number Three on the Cliché Docket,' she sighed. 'One: women wear silly hats. Two: women are lousy drivers. Three: women talk too much.'

'It's past midnight.'

'So it's past midnight. What am I—still *growing* or something?'

'Well, I'm going to sleep.'

'I thought you had.'

'I was reading.'

She put her cigarette out. 'All right,' she said. 'Go on. I'll be up in a minute.' But after he left she stayed down a good while longer, and we got around to one of her favourite topics: Psychoanalysis for the Masses. Wars, she believed, were the direct outcome, magnified a million-

fold, of the individual neurosis; hostility could not be quelled on an international scale while it continued to fester unconsciously in the separate self. She was just starting to tell me about an analyst named Helen Paige whom she'd heard at a lecture some years before when the phone rang.

'Who could be calling at this hour?' she asked; and then, brightening considerably: 'Hey! Do you think maybe my mother died?'

'It's probably Brad,' I said. 'Don't answer it!'

But she had already lifted the receiver and said hello.

'It *is*!' she whispered with a stricken look. 'He wants to know if you're here!'

'Hang up.'

'No. Here—you take it.'

'*Hang up!*'

She began to, but stopped. 'I can't, Jo!' she said, pushing the mouthpiece into a couch cushion. 'I just can't. He's got to know where you are sooner or later, hasn't he?'

I got up and took the receiver from her and smashed it into its cradle.

'He'll think *I* did it!' she cried out. 'What did you have to go and do a thing like that for? He'll think *I* did it!'

'What of it?'

'I just can't hang up on anybody, Jo! It makes me sick to my stomach! I used to have to do it to my father. . . .'

'Your father——?'

'I was seven then, and they'd just got the divorce. So he was supposed to send alimony every week—or, anyway, *give* it to me in an envelope when I went to meet him on Sundays with my nurse. Well, he gave it for a couple of weeks, and then he began to forget it; or

maybe he just didn't care. I don't know. He didn't have much, really; he was real big on tennis, but pretty low on making money; I guess he figured it didn't matter because my mother's parents were loaded. So, anyhow, when he stopped handing it over, my mother got sore as hell and wouldn't let him see me. So then he started calling me up instead. But she was furious and she kept making me hang up on him! Well, now it's years later and the guy's even *dead*, but I swear, Jo—I can actually vomit at the thought of cracking a phone down on anyone!

'Honest to Christ,' I said, 'if you don't knock off with that Freud crap, I'll go mad!'

She calmed. 'You *are* mad,' she said flatly. 'That's why you're so *afraid* of Freud.'

I groaned. And then suddenly I felt terribly tired. 'I'm sorry,' I muttered, not caring any more what I said or how I said it. 'Forgive me: I shouldn't have tried to implicate an Innocent Bystander. . . .'

It hit her squarely, and she left.

When she was gone I sat around a bit and had another drink. Then I browsed through the bookcases for something to take upstairs with me. But I had already read most of the stuff she collected because she had wanted me to: the Capote, the McCullers; the Cheever and Salinger; the Stafford and McCarthy; the Fitzgerald and Faulkner and Colette; the light verse and the sonnets and the love songs; and the First Novels of the young and the sensitive and the brilliant and the miserable.

Turning away I saw an old magazine lying on her desk. I picked it up and thumbed through it. And, of course, as surely I must have expected to, I found a poem by Frannie:

*My soul is an open wound
washed with rain;
and even the brush of sparrow wings
brings me pain.*

*Chartreuse April
and mornings slow with sleep
and robinsong and your sweet touch
make me weep.*

Love me! Love me!
the little green voices cry.
Oh, I shall love you, love you, Love!
And even of this I die.

It didn't help my mood any. In fact, it helped to push me even lower. When I went up to my room, empty-handed, I stopped to look in at Blair. She was all spread out on top of the sheet like a human hieroglyphic. I bent to touch her; and when I did, something made me lift her up into my arms. She didn't fully waken; just murmured a little sleeping sound. I kissed her cheek. The sun had already darkened her skin and streaked more blonde through her pony tail.

I carried her into my room and put her gently into my bed: far on the side so that I wouldn't disturb her when I got in. But after we'd lain there for a while she turned towards me unconsciously and inched her way over.

I fell asleep with my mouth against her hair.

THIRTEEN

It was on the Saturday of that first week that Frannie became incredibly ambitious and drove the children down to the Central Park zoo. Arising at an hour which to her must surely have seemed the crack of dawn, she shoved everyone into denim shorts and raced them indigestibly through my beautiful breakfast of apple fritters.

'Who wants to go anyway?' Stu scowled. 'We've been there forty hundred times!'

'It's educational!' Frannie answered sternly. 'Maybe you'll learn something!'

'We learn enough in school,' Blair said.

'It's Spring,' Frannie insisted. 'The mating season is on.'

'But we *know* about mating!' Stu argued.

'All *you* know about is *people*!' Frannie stormed. 'About the birds and bees you know absolutely nothing!'

Petey was more tractable than the others; but he made it quite clear that he had no intention of spending the whole day in *there*, looking at *them*.

'Who's *them*?' I asked.

'My thing,' she answered. 'You know: lions.'

I was alone in the house. I spent a good while typing some more résumés for agencies; I even called that nice woman who had been so encouraging a few days before. She

hadn't been able to get me placed yet, but she was still hopeful.

Marc came back from the office early because it was Saturday and we fixed a couple of drinks. Among the fourteen boxes of Jello on Frannie's kitchen shelf (her mother, I had heard, during one of her rare visits had announced to Jeri Perloff that anyone who had more than six boxes of Jello at one time was possessed of a Warped Mind) I found an unlikely jar of whole-grain Russian caviare. So Marc and I toasted some bread in small triangles and had ourselves a creditable feast.

I'd never been alone with him for that length of time before and I was looking forward to a nice old heart-to-heart through which, in some way, we might reach each other. But if I thought a few Scotches, caviare, and an empty house would enable me to pass through the gates of that quiet reserve, I was wrong.

'What thoughts?' I asked unwisely, when the conversation had stumbled into silence for the third time.

'No thoughts, doctor,' he answered with an enigmatic smile.

'How goes it with you and Frannie?' I went on lamely.

'How goes what?'

'Oh, things.'

'What things?'

'Cut it out,' I said. 'Life hasn't been exactly blue heaven for the past year; least of all for you, I'd suspect.'

'So?'

I bashed my cigarette out in the ash-tray. 'You're impossible,' I said, while his expression remained maddeningly unchanged. 'Why do you have to be this way? Can't you *ever* talk to me?'

‘Of course I can,’ he answered. ‘What would you like me to talk about?’

‘About you and Frannie!’

‘Fine. What would you like me to say about us?’

The sun was in my eyes. I got up and clattered the blind down. ‘Well,’ I began, with my back towards him, ‘it’s been rough on all of us and I just can’t help wondering what it’s done to *you*. You’re such a God-damned *clam*, Marc, and nobody in the world seems able to pry you open!’

‘I doubt that *nobody* can,’ he said, ‘but I fail to see why it should be *you*, Jo.’

‘You’re being nasty.’

‘Am I? Not really, I don’t think. I’m just not you or Frannie, that’s all. I don’t happen to belong to the Bare-the-Soul School so you figure I haven’t got a soul at *all*. But don’t worry about it, Jo; I do have one—even if I don’t let it run around naked all the time.’

‘That isn’t so. I never said you didn’t have a soul. I think you have! A beautiful one. I think you’re one of the most sensitive guys I’ve ever known!’

He stood up then, bowed a smiling but formal thank-you, and went out to the lawn. I watched him through the slats in the blind. He got down on all fours and, as he had at least a dozen times that same week, began pulling out the crab grass.

Frannie came back at around five forty-five. I was in the den still working on my applications. She entered, looking as if she’d spent the day in a pogrom, and collapsed on the couch. ‘Gimme a drink.’

I closed the lid on the typewriter with my half-filled

sheet still on the roller and made us two highballs. 'How was the zoo?' I asked.

'Fabulous.'

'And how were your friends, the lions?'

'I wouldn't quite call them my friends.'

I handed her the drink.

'Ever been there?' she asked.

'Oh, sure. One day a teacher was sick, and I had to run a field trip for the Fives.'

'Well, then you know. It's really something. You can stand back and look at all the cages at once. Only I usually narrow it down to one after a while. You have to keep at it with one in particular to get the communication going. . . .'

'The communication?'

'Yes. The communication.'

I took a deep drag on my cigarette. Then: 'Did it say anything interesting?'

'No, Jo. It's not a Shaggy Lion, and you can drop dead!'

'Really, Fran; I'm serious. What happens exactly?'

'Well, I look at it. And it looks at me. It actually does. Maybe it's a kind of hypnosis or something; but anybody can walk through there and kids can whistle and make noises—but it never takes its eyes off me. It doesn't ever seem to blink even.'

'What does it say?' I asked. 'Really. I don't mean Shaggy. I mean what gets communicated when you look at each other?'

'I'm not quite sure. There are so many things. It's like marriage, sort of. You don't have to say everything to someone you're married to, do you? How did *Mrs Miniver* put it? *Marriage is the catching of an eye across*

the table—or something like that? Only here it isn't across a table. It's through bars.'

'So you and this lion are *married*?'

'Well—yes; in a *way*. But the really nutty thing about it, Jo, is that this lion, this particular lion I look at all by itself isn't . . . isn't the kind with a mane. It's a God-damned female!'

The weird strain of the thing broke at that point and we both burst out laughing.

Frannie stopped first. 'Those dreams I have . . .' she said slowly. 'I never thought of it like that before. . . . That lion I dream about doesn't have a mane either—does it?'

I remembered her telling me: sometimes lying on the couch in the den as she was now; and that last time when she was in bed with measles: *This big cat, this terrible, beautiful, giant cat; the kind without a mane; just smooth and sleek and coming at me. . . .*

'Don't ask me,' I said quickly. 'They're *your* dreams, darling!'

I was beginning to feel like dropping the whole subject. It was riotous; but on the other hand it wasn't really funny at all. Everything Frannie took seriously had a sort of strange humour in it somewhere, but if she went on with it long enough, it got you and you ended up wondering why you were laughing. I was relieved when Marc walked in at that moment. He had crab-grassed his way around to the back of the house and hadn't heard her come home.

Her response to his entrance was the first of its kind I had witnessed. 'Marc!' she cried, as if she hadn't seen him for years. 'Where have you been? I've had the craziest day, and I've missed you so much! I didn't realize till

just now how awfully, how absolutely awfully I've missed you!"

She laughed then, and kept herself from joyously hugging him by busying herself with the lighting of a cigarette.

"When'd you get back?" he asked, sitting down on the floor against the bookcases, leaning over to examine the grass stains on his knees.

"Couple of minutes ago. What've you been doing? Pulling out those damned weeds again?"

"So? Me for weeds; you for lions. What're we doing tonight?"

"Nothing much. Marian called yesterday. She's having people over. But I figured it would be the same old rot so I said I wasn't sure. Why? Do you want to go out?"

"I don't care," he said, "but it's Saturday and I'd like to do *something*."

I knew immediately what had happened: Marian had asked them over and Frannie had turned her down because of me. She hadn't wanted to let on that I was living with them because, miraculously, no one seemed to know yet; and secondly, she didn't want to go out and leave me behind for fear I'd be hurt or lonely. "Go on," I said. "You go to Marian's and I'll be the sitter. I have to work on my applications, anyway."

"Oh, we have to do dinner and everything; and I'd be dead-beat by then. Still," she added, "I guess we could send the kids to The Hitching Post and just have sandwiches for ourselves. Let's, Marc. Round them up and drive them over, will you?"

"Okay," he said. "They can't be hungry anyhow after all the crap they probably ate at the zoo."

After they left Frannie and I didn't talk much. But she asked me to change seats with her so she could use the typewriter. Pulling my application out, she put a fresh sheet in, and leaned forward, head on arms, to think. Then, almost spasmodically, she sat up straight and began to pound the keys. She typed amazingly fast, with her two index fingers, journalist-style. When she was through she ripped the paper out and stuck it into the top drawer.

Marc was back within minutes, without the kids. 'They'll phone when they're finished,' he said.

She looked at him across the desk. It was a long look, intense with unspoken thoughts. Then: 'Oh, what a day . . .' she said. 'What a fraught, fraught day. You wouldn't think you'd get this tired, this positively blotto, just staring at some crazy old lion. I think I'll go upstairs and rest.'

'Wake you at seven?' he asked.

She stood up, pushed her hands into the side pockets of her shorts, and rocked gently on her moccasined heels. Eyes lowered to the floor, she said, quietly, cryptically, and with the trace of a slightly Satanic smile: 'Come with me? For a *little* while . . .?'

Nothing had ever been so obvious. I was sure Marc would back out somehow; blatancy had never been part of his personality. But he didn't. Returning her glance with a thoughtful one of his own, he joined her in a bond of understanding. *Call on me*, his look seemed to be saying with both tenderness and triumph. *I know the way things are. Call on me to fight your lion. For now, for this one moment and in this one way, I'm the only one who can. . . .*

And, with the look, he followed her upstairs.

I sat there by myself, hands against my ears, eyes closed.

But the hands got tired and I had to drop them; and closing my eyes didn't help to shut out the pictures that persisted in rising up before me. I tried to think of other things. But I couldn't. I was trapped: a child at a horror film, wanting to run out, but finding itself bound to the seat, unable to leave before the final, unbearable climax.

When, blessedly, the telephone rang, I leaped to answer it. It was Stu. They were done, and would somebody come to pick them up? I would, I told him.

The drive over and back was calming; the chatter of the kids turned my mind to simpler realities. When we got home they took their own baths and then disappeared into the basement to watch TV. It was nine-thirty before they came up and straggled their way to bed.

We never did have dinner; and Frannie and Marc didn't make it to Marian's party. They didn't even come downstairs again.

I was terribly tired, though it couldn't have been later than ten. I had left a magazine on the table in the upstairs hall and I went to get it, thinking I'd take it to bed with me.

The table stood against a wall on the outer side of Frannie's and Marc's room. Reaching for the magazine, intending to walk on, I was stopped by a sound of talking seeping through the closed door:

How do you feel about my breasts?

(As always, the pointed question: direct, sudden, and without warning.)

No. Really, now—I wanted to know. How do you feel about them? Look. This way. With my arms above my head. When you look at them, what do you feel . . . ?

(A murmured reply, too sleepy to be heard.)

Well, what happens when you touch them? No, not to me. I know what happens to me. I mean you. What happens to you? Not just emotionally. Tactilely.

(Silence.)

How do I taste? Sweet? Salty? Of course I know—from long ago. . . . All kids try to taste themselves at one point or another, don't they? But I mean now. Would the taste of me stand as a good taste by itself, for itself, or must it be mine? I mean—the taste of someone you love?

(Another silence.)

How do I smell? It can't be hard to say. I can say things. I can say anything. Why can't you? I can tell you how you smell: tonight of grass, because you were in it; a little whisky, but faint; soap from this morning, and shaving cream; air, sun, sweat, sex . . . partly fresh, partly stale, partly light, partly heavy. All Male. Tell me—how do women smell? You must know that from all the girls you had before you met me. Compare: are there differences? Is everyone the same?

(No reply.)

Tell me. Oh, come on, Marc, tell me! How do I sound? What sound do I make when it happens? Is it a sound of pleasure? Is it a sound of pain? Don't go to sleep. Please don't go to sleep! Stay up a minute, won't you? Tell me, Marc! I have to know! I have to know or I'll die! Oh, Jesus, somebody, TELL ME WHAT I'M LIKE!

FOURTEEN

IN the next few days my new and unlikely residence became known to the whole of Suburbia. After several attempts to worm it out of Frannie by telephone, Brad got in touch with the Mothers' Office Squad at Wingo and poured forth in detail the pitiful tale of his abandonment. This, added to the fact that Frannie came to school to pick me up in her convertible on a day when my battery went dead and the buses had already gone was enough to offer them one of the juiciest grapes that had ever hung from the vine: *Jo has left Brad because of Frannie, and she's living at the Brownes!*

'What about Marc?' I asked her, when several hints of question had been dropped into the conversation of her friends. 'I mean, the idea that it's getting around . . .'

'Marc's okay.'

'It won't be easy to take. . . .

'Don't worry. Marc has something the rest of us don't seem to have: an inner core of confidence.'

'Oh, sure,' I said. 'Marc has his love to live on! Which means by your lights, I suppose, that you can rip him to shreds and expect him to come up smiling. You figure you love him and Love is All. Well, I've been in love too, Frannie, and that isn't enough. You've got to *live* it a little. You can't treat people like that and then just kiss the hurt away! The poor guy needs *proof* of love!'

'Poor, poor, poor . . .' She smiled cryptically. 'Has anyone ever told you, Jo—you bear a striking resemblance to *Delilah*?'

By the end of the second week we had the eating arrangements down pat. One night we stayed home and the next we went out. On the nights we were in I did the cooking. We usually ate too late for the kids, but Frannie took care of that at about five-thirty with easies like hot dogs, hamburgers, and chops. That left me the time and space for things like lasagna, chicken Cacciatore, divinely sauced vegetables, and various other specialties I'd picked up along my travels through Bohemia.

On the nights we went out we frequented local spots like the Black Bear Inn, the Llewellyn Tavern, and Harry's Delicatessen—saving the Juniper, in town, for special celebrations. It was Frannie who called the celebrations, and the need for them occurred with the risings and ebbings of her personal tides. It was understandable that we dine out on caviare and mammoth lobsters when, out of the blue, she sold two poems to a top woman's magazine; or on the day her agent called to say an editor was interested in a rewrite of one of her older stories. But it was less clear on occasions when she might insist on painting the town simply because: *Did you know—Petey stopped wetting his bed exactly two and a half years ago tonight?* or: *The laundry man's sister knows a girl who had triplets this morning!* or: *Guess what! Mary McCarthy has a new book coming out this Fall!* or even because: *I was depressed all day but I just this minute got over it!*

It was on one of those End-of-the-Depression nights that I suspected her of having simply compounded the blues by trying to run away from them. We were driving back from the Juniper, as we usually drove: all three in the front seat with me between Marc and Frannie. (She could never sit in the middle, she said, because she got car-sick and had to be next to an open window.) The evening had been gay enough. Frannie had had us and herself convulsed when, having waited a considerable time for Samuel, the maître D, to take our order, she greeted his belated arrival with: '*Sam, You Made Us Pant Too Long!*' and again during dessert when she summed up the entire concept of psychoanalysis as: '*Fee and Sympathy*'. But she quieted soon after we'd started for home and I was aware of an uneasiness in the car: she kept straightening, taking deep breaths, squirming away from me, closer to the window. After we got to the house she went into the kitchen for ice-water. When she had it poured she put her arms and head down on one of the counters, twisting a little.

'What's wrong?' I asked.

'Back hurts.'

'You seemed uncomfortable in the car.'

'Well, it's crowded and hot and everybody sticks to everybody.'

'Here,' I said, walking over to her. 'I helped in a hospital once. I was terrific at back-rubs.' I started kneading her neck, working downwards, then up again. 'Better?'

'That's swell,' she answered, standing up suddenly. 'It's fine now.'

'I don't mind,' I told her. 'They used to keep me at it for hours. I used to——'

'Look,' she broke in, 'I'm telling you: it's fine now!'

‘Okay. But if it isn’t by tomorrow, I’ll——’

She picked up the untouched glass of water and peered into it. ‘You’re very kind,’ she said slowly. ‘Very kind. . . .’

‘Now just what does *that* mean?’

‘What does it mean?’ She put her glass down. ‘Well, let’s see. One might assume that when one is kind one is not cruel. On the other hand—one might be kind simply to cover up the fact that one *is* cruel. . . .’

‘Oh, Christ,’ I sighed. ‘I’m full of a marvellous meal and it’s too late at night for *that*!’

We didn’t talk after we left the kitchen. Marc went to bed and Frannie, obviously still bugged from her morning depression, followed behind him.

Unsleepy myself, I decided to work on another job summary. My woman had not yet come up with anything definite so I figured I might as well try another agency. But when I looked in the desk for my résumé carbons, thinking to copy parts and add a few things, there was a sheet of Frannie’s typing lying on top of them. I moved it off to the side; yet, as I did, I found myself reading it. This, evidently, was the hurried piece she had written on her return from the zoo.

I don’t know that she ever did anything with it; ever used it in any way. It may have been one of a stack of false beginnings which never materialized. In any case, I remember it; word for word. It went like this:

Memo—(for poem? short story? novel?):

Lions roar at feeding time. But at other times, unless agitated by extremely wilful spectators (of which there

are few) they sleep, pace their cages on padded feet, or lie stretched out—watching you with amber eyes. Compared with other houses in a menagerie (those with shrieking birds or jabbering monkeys, for instance) the Lion House, while holding within it the most murderous forces of hostility, is the house which appears, on the surface, to be truly at peace.

FIFTEEN

WE gave a party the following Saturday night: twenty-six altogether, counting Bill Brecker for me. That part of it seemed ridiculous and I told Frannie not to bother. But she insisted. 'You can't roam around all evening in single blessedness,' she said.

'But I don't care,' I said. 'Really: *I don't care.*'

'Well, I do,' she argued, 'and I'm running this thing. Besides—he's stable.'

'How stable can he be?' I asked. 'His marriage went on the rocks, didn't it?'

'That,' she replied dogmatically, 'isn't always proof of instability. Getting out of the kind of rat race *he* was in could prove a person's *strength*!'

So he came, and it was pretty awful. I don't mean he wasn't nice: he was—very; and I liked the guy. But I hardly think he felt that way about me: it's tough trying to be gallant with a female who's a good many years older, and somebody you're stuck with because your hostess preordained it. There was no doubt in my mind that he'd come simply to please Frannie. His conversation with me kept turning back to her.

'You're fond of her, aren't you?' I put in at one point.

'Quite,' he answered. 'Quite, quite. But it couldn't ever have been Frannie for me.' He smiled. 'If she ever thought

of me at all it was as a brother. God, how that kid wanted a brother! When we were little she used to keep saying it to me: *You be my brother!* she'd say. *You be it or I won't play with you any more!* She gave her mother a time about it too, always asking her to get a baby boy. Well, her mother told her that storks brought babies and that if she'd keep putting sugar cubes out on the window-ledge the stork would come and leave a little brother there some night. So every evening before she went to bed she'd put the damned sugar out; and the next morning it would be gone. I guess the wind blew it off, or maybe her mother took it—and that gave her the idea that the stork was collecting it and that any night he'd be paying off. . . .'

'It's amazing how you remember all that,' I said. 'It must have meant a lot to you.'

'Oh, I remember,' he said. 'You know, you get through med. school on your memory! . . . I remember going up to her house one Christmas afternoon because my nurse had a present for her nurse. Frannie'd got a load of new stuff. But the thing she was most excited about was this doll they'd given her. It was a boy doll. It wore a sailor suit. So we went into her room with it and the first thing she did was start taking off its clothes! Well, she got the clothes off all right, and I'll never forget her face when she looked up at me and said: *He doesn't have a wee-wee tail!* I don't know how she'd have recognized one if she saw it—with all the dames in that house the mother, the nurse, the cook, the laundress—but Christ, was she disappointed! I thought she was going to cry. She didn't, though. There was one sure thing about Frannie: she never cried. She used to get Hell written all over that beautiful little face of hers, but she never cried. . . .'

'You tell it like a story,' I said.

'It's a story all right—but a true one.' He lit a cigarette, and then lit mine. 'You want to hear more?'

'I'm fascinated.'

'Three drinks and I yack. You sure you're not bored?'

'I've never been less bored in my life.'

'Well,' he went on, 'about that doll thing: I must have felt awful because a few days later we were playing in the park, and we went off behind some bushes and I showed her mine! Was she interested! But it wasn't enough just to look at it. She wanted to see it *work*! Hey . . . are you sure you want to hear all this?'

'Go on.'

'Well, I said okay, and I worked it for her. And you know what she does? She comes right over close to me and sticks her hand out into the stream! So then when I'm finished she says: *You come on home, Billy, and show it to my Mommy.* Well, I guess I figured things were going just a bit too far, and I said no, I wouldn't. And she said: *It's all right to show my Mommy. She'll like it!*

I laughed.

'Don't laugh,' he said, emptying his glass. 'I am now drunk. But I am not *too* drunk. If you ever tell Frannie I told you all this, I swear I'll have you hanged. . . .'

Throughout our conversation the party milled uncaringly about us. Marian and Jeff were there: Jeff off in a corner by himself watching the Scotch-lines lower in the bottles, estimating the cost, and writing the Brownes off as Suckers; Marian on the arm of a chair making a subtle play for a teacher named Melvyn Singer who responded with an embarrassed smile. His wife, several years his senior, was holding court on the floor nearby. 'I want

Melvyn to have other women!' she was bellowing. 'I *insist* on it! If a man doesn't sleep with women in general, he doesn't *like* women in general; which simply proves that he can't possibly like his own wife!'

'Provided his wife's a woman,' ventured some brave soul in the circle around her.

'That is not humour!' Claire Singer snorted, reminding me faintly of a small Black Angus. 'That is lack of intelligence; which is *not* surprising at a party given by Frannie Browne!'

There had, apparently, been a running feud between Claire and Frannie of some five years' standing. It was, perhaps, a clash of creative personalities. Claire wrote; and while she remained singularly unpublished she believed her efforts to be Sincere. Frannie, she was now roaring, was nothing but a Literary Whore, an Exploiter of Mass Mentality.

'Have you ever read Frannie's stuff?' someone wanted to know.

The question caused Claire a moment's discomfort. 'Get me another drink!' she shouted to Melvyn who, smiling apologetically at Marian, went off to fill her glass.

'Creativeness,' Claire went on, while waiting to be refuelled, 'can not be relegated to the Market Place. It must become an integral part of one's everyday life. What is there in this room that wasn't bought with money? The art in *my* house is *my own*! I wove my bath-mat on a hand loom; I dyed my bed-sheet draperies in a vat of Welch's Grape Juice on the kitchen stove; yesterday I created an abacus out of green peas on a frame of plastic straws!'

'Aren't you confusing Art with Occupational Therapy?' Frannie put in, wandering gracefully through.

'What gives with her?' I asked at a later juncture, in the den.

'The big thing about Claire,' Frannie answered, 'the really *big* thing about Claire is her spectacular lack of talent. . . .'

'Why do you have her here?'

'Floor show,' she said. 'Popular demand. Melvyn's Jeri's cousin, so they're here a lot—from Queens. And if Jeri doesn't bring them, they're imported by special invitation. Melvyn smiles-up the women, and you can always depend on Claire for a knock-down performance.'

'Is it worth it?'

'It's all right,' she assured me. 'Claire's like poison: if you take her in small, steady doses you become immune.'

Our conversation was cut short by sudden mayhem in the living-room.

'Let go of me, you bastard!' Claire was screaming.

'Come on, dear,' Melvyn coaxed, trying to drag her up by the armpits. 'It's late and you're getting tired.'

'I'm *not* tired!' she fumed, turning back to an elderly friend of Marc's known as Judge McClain. 'I'm talking to this *man*! Do you know what this man *does*? This son of a bitch puts innocent people in *jail*!'

'No, no, darling,' Melvyn soothed. 'You never want to leave; but I know—you're getting tired now. I can see the signs, honey; you're getting tired, and it's a long, long drive. . . .'

'God damn your mediocre soul!'

It took Melvyn, Marc, and Bill Brecker to remove her to the car.

'I hate men, I hate men!' she bawled all the way across the lawn. '*Women, women!* Only *women* know the meaning of Love!'

'That *too*?' I asked Frannie.

She didn't answer.

Though the party didn't break up till after four, I broke up a while before that. I don't know what happened: it might have been the booze, or the hour, or the fact that this had been my first social bout without Brad. Try as I did to match the spirits of the people around me, I kept feeling out of things. At one point I meandered up to Frannie's room and sat there by myself, staring at the telephone. Buzzed and bleary as I was, I think I actually came close to picking it up and calling him.

I had been back to the house the afternoon before to get the rest of my clothes. I had gone right from school, circling the place carefully to make sure he wasn't there; and being, I guess, both relieved and disappointed to find he wasn't.

There were flowers out, blooming sturdily in spite of the weeds; but the grass was scorched in big beige patches. I knew before I entered how it would be inside.

The kitchen positively reeked of dirty dishes and garbage; and the bedroom was even worse: unaired, the sheets lay on the floor in a dank, grey tumble; there were used socks and underwear everywhere; three large ash-trays on the bed-table were overflowing with butts, fruit pits, and the crusts of sandwiches; half under the radiator lay an open book of poems with its spine broken.

I thought of all that over again, the night of the party, as I sat on the bed near the telephone, wanting to call him. And I remembered too that there were just about two weeks left before Frannie and Marc and the kids would pack up and fly to Bermuda, leaving me to fend for myself.

The woman at the agency had called that morning to

say that there was a chance for an all-round administrative post at one of the music schools: Clarke Institute. I'd also got a lead on a one-room apartment in the Village; had even gone to look at it. It was the size of a large closet with a beat-up screen drawn over an alcove at one end which hid the stove and refrigerator. The bathroom was out in the hall. You could manage a slow half-turn from the sink to the john; but not a fast one. I thought of the girl in the Martex Towel ad. *One photo in here*, I thought, *and even you could take up street-walking.*

I had left with a funny weight in my chest. It was such a flea-bag. But the rent was low and I could probably revive things with a few cans of paint and some fabrics. Things *could* work out when you wanted them to. . . . Yet now, sitting there on the bed with the party raging below, I began feeling sorry for myself. Because no matter how I tried, it was still going to be pretty hard. I don't know. I'd got so *used* to Frannie: those nights we spent in the den after Marc had gone to sleep, drinking, soul-searching, smoking ourselves into a lavender fog; the crazy arguments; that hilarious hogwash she handed out about the Great God, Sigmund Freud; to say nothing of our brilliant rehashes of the works of Dr Kinsey.

I would miss her—badly. What was I going to do every night? Catch a bite alone somewhere, or break out a package of frozen fish sticks and read a lousy magazine? *Two weeks to go*, I thought; *and Elizabeth Johnston Bradford Faces Life*. . . .

I got up and went downstairs again. But the gaiety had now gone far beyond me.

' . . . at the Atwater!' someone was squealing incredulously. '*I* always thought the Atwater was a place where you held a *convention*!'

'Not Harriet Lyons!' somebody else howled. 'Harriet Lyons wouldn't know the meaning of the *word*!'

Then: 'Stop worrying about Harriet,' someone chuckled. 'Harriet's a has-been. Frannie's stolen the stage. Where have you been? I've got it bona fide from three different sources.'

'You mean about Brad?'

I walked straight into their midst, stepped over several bodies, and lowered myself to the floor beside them.

The silence was deafening.

I went to bed soon after that, not bothering to announce my departure. I was tired and disgusted, and I dropped down on the spread with all my clothes on, blacking out immediately. But I think I awakened at one point, half-way, and that Frannie was leaning over me. 'Take off that junk jewellery,' I think she said. 'You're liable to slit your wrists.' But she said it softly, with kindness, and a catch in her throat. And she must have unsnapped my bracelets for me because the next morning I found them in the white cigarette cup on my table.

We all slept most of the next day, but late in the afternoon Frannie lit into me about Bill Brecker.

'Why did you disappear?' she asked. 'He was looking all over for you!'

'He was looking for *you*,' I said.

'Me? What would he want with *me*? He was crazy about you, Jo. He said so. He told me he thought you were wonderful. You could have shown a little *interest*, for God's sake——'

'Oh, can it,' I cut in. 'I'm old enough to be his mother!'

'Did I say you had to *marry* him? Couldn't you just

have maybe *dated* him? When you go out you get around. You meet people. You——'

'Not with him,' I said. 'Not with him because——'

'Because he's so nice,' she finished. 'Because he's a good, sane, normal guy who gets to work every day and loves what he does and gets paid for it. Because he wouldn't make you miserable enough. *That's* why. Because you've got to be hurt some more. You're going to sit around waiting for Mr Right to come along. And Mr Right is going to be a tall, thin, beautiful fugitive from the booby hatch!'

'Please, Frannie,' I pleaded. 'It's Sunday. Let's have a Day of Rest, shall we?'

'You'll rest all right,' she said. 'If you don't watch out you'll Rest in Peace——'

Josie Bradford, R.I.P.,
Cornered Immortality;
Made the top of Heaven's list
As Miss Atlantic Masochist!'

'Did you just make that up?' I asked.

'Yes—just; though I'll admit the idea has occurred to me before!'

'You know something?'

'What?'

'I wouldn't be at all surprised if one of these days I woke up hating you!'

'Neither would I,' she said.

SIXTEEN

THAT Wednesday was Frannie's birthday.

She was thirty-one. But in spite of violent reactions to most of the aspects of living, Getting Older didn't seem to bother her. 'I was scared of thirty,' she said, 'because—you know; I told you once—my mother kept warning me I'd be dead by then. But the fact is, I'm looking *forward* to growing up, if you know what I mean. Actually, I've always wanted to be *forty*. Forty is so mellow, so mature. My fantasy is that on that day I'll get up real early in the morning and everything will be different. I'll just suddenly—know who I *am*, or something!'

'You don't believe half the things you say,' I told her.

'Well, of course I don't!' she said. 'What am I—*gullible*?'

Marc gave her an irregular-shaped package wrapped in plain brown paper, tied with a length of fishing-line. I watched with a mixture of awe and incredulity as she opened it. It contained a small spiral notebook, a bunch of coloured rubber bands, a box of brass-plated paper clips, a tin of Band-Aids, a jar of caviare, a tiny potted cactus plant, a card of safety-pins, a packet of six pocket-combs, three bottle caps, and two rolls of Kodachrome film to be shot in Bermuda.

She was utterly enthralled; especially, it seemed, with the coloured rubber bands and the cactus plant. She

kissed him. It was a long one. When I saw her hips push forward I turned my head away.

Then the kids rushed in. Petey gave her one and a half clay candle-holders made by hand at Wingo. The missing half had fallen off in the bus. Blair presented her with a set of pot-holders woven at Llewellyn in a class called Functional Arts. And Stu came up with a Zippo cigarette lighter accompanied by a card which read, in a jagged red-pencilled scrawl: *Don't ask me to find matches any more.*

That day after school I drove over to Vivien Van Gogh's in Meade's Manor. Vivien Van Gogh's is a small *avant-garde* clothes shop owned and operated by a girl named Miriam Cohn. It was called Vivien Van Gogh's because Miriam Cohn was in competition with a similar shop less than a block away called Margo Matisse's. (Margo Matisse's was, for some strange reason, owned and operated by a girl named Margo Matisse.)

I went to Van Gogh's rather than Matisse's simply because I knew Miriam. She had two children at Wingo and we had met several times. She was a largish girl, a bit on the spreading side; and her foremost claim to fame in Meade's Manor was the fact that nothing bothered her. Various of her friends could always be found in the store in the afternoon, not buying anything—just getting their anxieties fixed. Miriam was, in effect, a kind of ambulatory Miltown.

'Oh, hi . . .' she said as I walked in. 'Want some coffee? I've just made some for the deadheads.'

'Thanks, no,' I said. 'I'm in a hurry. Can I look around?'

'Sure, sure,' she answered, casting a casual glance at

a group of females sitting on Eames chairs towards the back. 'But don't tell me you came to *purchase* something . . . !'

One of the girls lifted her head. 'If that crack was meant for me,' she said, 'it's absolutely unfair! I told you I'd buy something if everything in the damned place weren't Madras!'

'Nothing fits here,' a second added informatively.

'That's a fact!' said a third. 'If you want anything to *fit*, you have to go to Bergdorf Goodman!'

'Drink a little hot coffee,' Miriam suggested soothingly. 'It's on the stove in the bathroom. I have to take care of Mrs Bradford. And hey, lissen—there's a bag in there with a couple of salami sandwiches. . . . What did you have in mind?' she asked, turning to me.

'A gift,' I answered. 'For a friend of mine. Something sort of—classic?'

'Classic!' sputtered the first girl. 'If your friend can't use a khaki loin-cloth you're out of luck!'

Nobody got up to get the coffee and sandwiches so Miriam excused herself and went for them.

'Here,' she crooned gently, coming back with a tray. 'Here, here . . . '

All conversation stopped. The faces of the girls seemed to soften like those of trusting children as, slowly, they put out their hands to receive the food.

I wandered around for a while; and then I found it. I knew the moment I saw it, lying in a tangle of pullovers and Jamaica shorts, that it had been made for Frannie. It was a Haymaker shirt of pure silk in pale, pale orange, and cut like a boy's. I could see her in it with the top button open and the sleeves rolled up above her elbows. I did a quick mental estimate, including taxes, and

realized that the price came to more than half a week's salary.

It didn't make sense; but I took it.

When Frannie opened the box that evening she was moved to speechlessness.

'Jo,' she said finally, in a voice that seemed to come from miles away. 'Jo, it's so beautiful. . . .'

Then she carried it into the powder-room and closed the door. When she came out she had it on. The collar was open and the sleeves rolled up, as I'd seen them in my mind. The looseness of the shoulders and bosom tapered down into the narrow waist of the grey linen shorts she had been wearing. And she'd put on some pale orange lipstick.

'Take off your glasses,' I said.

She did.

'You're a pretty girl,' I said, appraising her squarely, seeing her eyes without their guardian frames.

'Don't tell her that,' Marc said. 'It's a waste of time. She doesn't believe you. Tell her she's awful. Then she'll think you're being honest.'

'I'm not awful,' she objected.

'All right: you're pretty.'

'But I'm not pretty either!'

'Christ!' Marc said. 'You can't even *lose* an argument around here!'

I laughed. Then I went over to her and lifted her face in my hands. 'Happy birthday, darling,' I said.

'What can I give you for yours?' she asked quickly. 'When is it? August? August what?' "

The phone rang. We looked at it for a second. We had

all developed a certain amount of apprehension about it because of Brad. But it wasn't Brad. It was Long Distance: Frannie's mother.

'Yes . . . thank you,' Frannie said, her voice-tone at least an octave higher. 'Oh, yes . . . very nice. A little plant and lots of other things: caviare . . . and stuff from the kids; and the most wonderful shirt from—a friend of ours. Yes . . . yes . . . fine. Don't worry. . . . All right. . . . Yes . . . all right. Soon. . . . Really? Oh, that's marvellous. Yes. . . . No. . . . No. . . . Now don't; just *please* don't. . . . All right. Good-bye. . . .'

She put the receiver down and stood there, seeming slightly dazed.

'What did she say?' I asked.

'Oh, she wanted to congratulate me. And she wanted to know if Marc had given me anything *decent*. . . .'

'How nice,' Marc said, curling his lip. 'There's nothing like sincere maternal interest. What else?'

'Well, she asked if I'd stopped smoking,' Frannie answered, picking up a cigarette and Stu's lighter. 'And she said she has this date with this new man she met and he makes elevators and he's a millionaire. And she asked how we were and said it was a miracle we hadn't all ended up in a mental hospital yet; and was the front door-knob polished, and did the children brush their teeth because if they didn't they'd all fall out. . . . And . . .'

Her voice began to trail away.

'Let's have it,' Marc demanded. 'What else?'

'Well . . . did I love her; you know—she always asks me *that*. . . . And then she finished by telling me that I wouldn't—that I wouldn't live to be forty. . . .'

The next evening the man called about my apartment. Somebody else was interested, and did I want it or didn't I? Yes. I wanted it.

So the day after, Frannie and I went out and bought several gallons of rubber-base paint; the kind you put on with rollers. Frannie had a lot of suggestions about colour combinations, but I finally convinced her that you couldn't go Dramatic in a cubby-hole, and we wound up with a safe light green, plus some gay chintz with green and yellow flowers all over it for a studio couch cover, cushions, a chair slip, and a pair of draperies. I'd have to have draperies in spite of the summer heat. There was an ugly iron fire escape outside the window that would be terribly depressing to look at; besides, the whole thing faced a courtyard with a hundred other windows staring curiously into mine.

That same night we lugged Frannie's portable sewing-machine down and I sewed while she painted. That Frannie should own a sewing-machine came as a real surprise. I was less amazed only when she confessed she had never learned to use it.

The painting took longer than the sewing did: we kept going back for a week of evenings and some afternoons, together—or meeting there. I had two keys and I gave her one so that she could get there ahead of me on the days I was held up at school.

Armed with gin and soda, Frannie painted with a vengeance *while* she painted; but she was constantly knocking off for a Rest Period. This meant she'd drop the gooky roller right down on the bare floorboards, curl up on the studio bed, and start up discussions on Stimulating Subjects.

'What do you think of homosexuality?' she began

suddenly one evening when she had accidentally kicked over the last can of paint and there wasn't really much else she could do.

'What do you mean, what do I *think* of it?' I asked over the whirr of the machine. 'It's not exactly something I've given much *thought* to!'

'What I mean is——' She poured a second drink slowly. 'What I mean is, do you accept it as—part of the universal psyche? Can you—well, place it *calmly* within the bracket of Man's total make-up? I mean——' There was another pause while the soda splashed in. 'I mean, do you think it's—natural?'

'Sure I think it's natural,' I answered. 'I think it's natural for homosexuals.'

'Have *you* ever—had a brush with it?'

I looked up. 'Are you kidding?'

'No. Really. Have you ever had—well, *feelings* like that about another woman?'

I shut off the machine and lit a cigarette. 'Frannie, my sweet,' I said, 'I should think after all this time, after all the dirt I've given you on my illustrious past with *men*, you'd be able to conclude all by your little self that my glands are in shipshape order!'

'Screw your glands!' she exclaimed. 'Who's talking about your *glands*? Wake up. Radclyffe Hall flunked out in the Twenties!'

'I never read it,' I said, starting the machine again.

'Did you ever read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*?'

'Oh, sure. Unexpurgated. A gal at college got it from a Lit. prof. she was going with.'

'Oh.'

'What do you *mean*—*oh*?'

She put her drink down and got off the couch. 'I just

think,' she said slowly, pushing the spilled paint can into a corner with the tip of her moccasin, 'that choices aren't accidental; that everything's motivated by—forces in the unconscious. And, after all, it might be much more *comfortable* to identify with *Lady Chatterley* than, say, with *Stephen* in her "well of loneliness". You know what I mean?"

'Listen,' I said, snapping the machine off and lowering the lid, 'the girl happened to get *Chatterley* from this guy, so I borrowed it. I don't have anything against homosexuals. The idea doesn't make me feel *uncomfortable*. And I *do* know that it exists to one degree or another in everybody. So stop trying to tell me I'm *afraid* of something! I know that Pam Coulton came up in Connecticut—the one that has that little antique shop; and sometimes I wonder what in hell she sees in that crazy Foster girl she lives with. But I like Pam, and it's her life, and it's got nothing to do with *me*.'

'Well, sure,' she said, bending down to look at the smear of paint on her shoe, examining it, touching it with her finger. 'But haven't you ever been—curious?'

'Oh, I suppose so,' I answered, '. . . if you mean curious in the sense of—well, I don't know. I met Pam in a grocery store once. Brad and I were having a picnic up there; just last Fall, as a matter of fact. We forgot the mustard, so that's why I went in there to get some. And there was Pam—buying a whole bunch of stuff: olive oil, anchovies, mushrooms, smoked oysters . . . and then she got this beautiful little steak: it had to be a certain cut, and a certain size, and trimmed a certain way. And all the while we were talking together I kept thinking about how she was going to eat those things with Foster: how they were going to sauté those mushrooms, and broil that

pretty little steak, and set up a small table with two candles, and put the record player on; how they'd have a cigarette with coffee, and sit around a while talking, listening to music, and then do the dishes; and then—well, what would happen after that. So—yes: I was curious. I was curious about the kind of decision that lies behind a thing like that; curious about the kind of need, and the kind of—love. . . . And then something else happened; or at least I felt it did. Pam looked at me, sort of, and she said, "Give me a ring, will you, Jo? I'd like to see you some time." And I said, "Thanks, Pam. I will—one of these days." I said it just the way you'd say it to anyone. Only Pam wasn't just anyone; and I knew I'd never call her, because it was—different. Yes, sure, I've been curious; the way I'd be curious about anything that was different. . . .'

'But you've never wondered about—yourself?' She was facing the wall then, away from me, squinting, it seemed, at a glossy patch of paint that hadn't yet dried. 'You've never wondered how it would be if it were—you?'

'Why should I have?' I asked. 'It has nothing to do with me. What's that line in that Shaw story you like so much—*The Girls in Their Summer Dresses*?: *I casually inspect the universe . . .*? Well, that's how it is: there are parts of the universe which aren't part of *me*. I just "casually inspect" them. They have nothing to do with me. Aren't you like that?'

'Me?' She blew gently on the wet spot and then turned around. 'It's a kind of objectivity I'd give my soul for: the separation of myself from every God-damned clutching atom of existence around me; to be able to stand apart from things; to be an entity within myself! But I can't. Every blade of grass I walk on, every pebble, every insignificant weed leaves its imprint on my heel. There isn't

anything I don't need to touch, feel, know, share, become. . . .'

I remembered her poem: *Even the brush of sparrow wings brings me pain*; and, too, the night she went to bed with Marc and I stood in the hall, after it was over, and heard her: *How are my breasts? How do they feel? How do I taste? How do I smell? How do I sound . . . ?* the pleading, the questioning, the needing to know, through Marc, through God, through anyone, the things which are known, or should be known, or maybe are never known, but which are rarely ever asked and rarely ever answered. *Jesus, somebody, tell me what I'm like!*—as if she could be he, and in being he could have herself; and in being he and having herself could be herself and have the All.

'It's because you write,' I told her now, protecting my thoughts in a shell of synthetic simplicity. 'When people are creative they have to live on the inner side of things; they have to feel a lot.'

'Everything?' she asked, watching the ash form on her cigarette. '*Everything?* How weeds feel when I walk on them? How Foster feels when Coulton comes home with the groceries . . . ?'

In spite of other such sojourns in the realms of psycho-philosophy we did a wonderful job. On the sixth night we finished, cleaned up, and got everything on and hung. It wasn't going to be bad at all: with a new bamboo screen to cover the stove area and books and things to warm it up a little it might just possibly be perfect—if you liked solitude; and maybe I would. Or at least I felt maybe I would at that moment, standing there, surveying the fruits of a week's labour; like it *enough*, I thought, to let

the damned phone rings its bell off when Brad found out where I was and began hounding me.

He'd been hounding terribly in the past ten days. He'd called Frannie a dozen times, at all hours, hoping I'd answer. But I never did; and she'd finally reached the point where she could be self-analytical enough to convince herself that he *wasn't* her father and that she could hang up on anyone she wanted to.

He'd even gone so far as to come to the house. But God watches over children, drunks, and alienated wives, and we happened to follow our Juniper dinner that night with a movie in town—so we weren't home. But we knew he'd been there because he left a note with the sitter: *I waited for hours*, it read; *Darling, darling, when are you coming back?* H.B.

I laughed and tore it up; but when we all went to bed I felt sick: sick and lonely and starved enough to die; and I lay there till morning, swearing at the beautiful, rotten memory of him for making things so much harder

SEVENTEEN

SHORTLY before D-Day (*D* for departure and depression) the agency woman called to say she thought I had the music school job. She had talked with the head, a man named Desmond, and he wanted to see me.

The office squad at Wingo knocked off before the actual semester ended, so I was free, and would be from there on in. Much to the wailings of the Board, I had turned in my permanent resignation.

The music-school man, called Dez by his associates, struck me on first meeting as the world's Father. He was in his late sixties, big, white-haired, and shoulder-patting. The job was vague, he confessed, and it would be up to the person who took over to delineate its boundaries. While it all seemed a bit too undefined for comfort's sake, he patted away my trepidation with a large, warm hand and assured me that I would do excellently.

The salary would start at seventy a week, and I accepted willingly. I would begin on July fifth, with the opening of the summer school. And when I confided my immediate financial drought he offered a week's salary in advance.

That last day at Frannie's was a nightmare. Never having engineered a six-week vacation for two adults and three children I had to admire Frannie's serenity in the face

of such confusion. Of course, there were assists which could not have been counted on by anyone *but* Frannie. For instance: the drug-store man made three separate trips in his own car to deliver items which she had failed to pick up during the week and had only remembered from time to time on the last day. And the laundry man had eased things up by promising to stop by after they'd left with a key she'd given him—to strip the beds and turn the mattresses back for airing.

My own departure problems were far less complicated. I had my three valises packed and waiting at the door by 5 p.m.

We weren't going to have that final dinner together. The Weinricks had asked Frannie and Marc over for a farewell buffet to save them the trouble of a messy kitchen. I thought they'd refuse because they had to feed the kids anyway; but they didn't.

'We'll be back early,' she told me. 'We have to leave here at seven in the morning and I'm not going to hang around there till all hours. Why don't you stay till we come home tonight?'

'No,' I said. 'I'll wait till you leave for the Weinricks', but you've got a sitter for tonight, and there's no point in—dragging it out.'

The whole time they were upstairs dressing to go out I lay on the couch in the den, handing myself sermons: *pull yourself together; you've got a cute apartment and a decent job; and then, there's no telling whom you'll meet or what will happen in six weeks. . . .*

Added to these emotional placebos was the thought of the letters we'd exchange: I'd always detested writing—

but it would be different writing to Frannie, getting long, funny, complicated answers from her. I could probably be long and funny myself with her there at the other end, inspiring me. . . .

When she came down to the den, ready to go, she was wearing a bright blue linen sheath and a string of pearls; and because I was lying stretched out she seemed unusually tall. Marc stood behind her in the doorway.

'Bye, Jo,' he said, smiling. 'Come on, Fran—tear yourself away.' He turned to go out to the car. 'I may have to fly back on business for a couple of days,' he added over his shoulder. 'If I do I'll give you a ring for dinner—if you aren't dated.'

'You look funny,' Frannie said when he'd gone.

'Do I? I was just thinking about letters. You will write, won't you?'

'Of course. The minute I get there.'

'I'll miss you.'

'I'll miss you too.'

'Okay,' I said. 'Go already, will you?' It was even worse than I'd thought it would be. There was a fist full of tears in my throat getting set to open up.

The car honked impatiently from the road.

'I'll be fine,' I told her. 'Just get the hell out of here.'

She began to leave. Then, suddenly, she threw herself on me and dug her arms into the cushion behind my head. 'Oh, don't, Jo,' she begged, tasting, I knew, the tears on my face. 'Please don't, Jo! Please, please don't. . . .' And then, on the wetness, I felt her lips travel lightly, quickly, down the length of my scar.

'Get out of here!' I said harshly.

As she went through the door it all broke loose. It was insane, it was childish, it was shameful; but I couldn't

help it. I don't know what it was: but seeing the back of her dress, watching her walk out, knowing that from now on I was going to be alone—those, and a thousand other things that might have been inside of me that I couldn't even know or feel, must have been what did it; and I began to sob.

You don't remember the exact words that come with sobbing; not really. But I know they were senseless and without meaning. And later, when the car had driven off, I felt so damned guilty. Because I should have been strong enough to wait till she had gone. I should have saved her the awfulness of having to hear me.

I hung around till the kids came up from TV and saw to it that they bathed and got to bed; and then the sitter arrived—one of the neighbours' boys from down the block. But still I didn't want to go. *A drink*. I thought; *and then I'd better check the place for things I may have forgotten*.

I found a few, too: there was a lipstick I'd left in the powder-room, and a slip still hanging in my closet. And then I remembered my résumé carbons. I figured it would be wise to keep them in case I had to go job-hunting again.

They weren't in the top drawer of the desk so I delved into the others: I went through all of them till I got to the bottom one which was divided by wooden slats to form a file. I recalled, then, having slipped them in there for safe keeping. But when I drew them out the paper clip caught on to some other pages, and those came out too. They weren't mine; they were Frannie's. They were headed: *Notes for Novel—Episode: night of party—here*.

It was the party Brad and I almost didn't get to; her

own; the one she'd left with Jeff Deitz to come and pick us up: the night I'd driven back with Jeff and she with Brad—not getting there till midnight.

Once I started reading I couldn't stop. And when I finished I typed a copy of it to take with me. I don't know that it was just or right; the idea of ethics never entered my mind. I simply knew that I would have to read it again; and that in some indirect way it was, in actuality, partially mine.

It offered, among other things, the answer to the question I'd asked her the morning I burst in, fresh from leaving home; the question first put into my mind so casually, yet so viciously, by Brad. She'd pleaded with me then to believe her—about the baby; not to make me tell her how she knew, how she could be so sure, that it hadn't been his. Oddly, I had never brought it up again. I had taken her word, not asking for more, not wanting more—because, God only knew, I had had enough.

But there it was; and I have it with me now, stuck into the pack of letters she sent me from Bermuda, which, for some reason, I have not yet been able to discard:

Notes for Novel—Episode: night of party—here.

. . . So we walked out to the car, Jo with Jeff, Brad with me—holding my arm so I wouldn't trip on my heels in the rough-dirt driveway. Make sure you just cart her, Jo kidded. And I told her she ought to have her paranoids removed. . . .

We got in then, Brad and I, and bumped out to the main road and just drove a while, not saying anything.

I was so sure of myself, so sure I'd be strong and firm and sensible—all those honourable, high-flown things people flatter themselves into believing they are, promising

themselves they will be, and then ruin deliberately, on the lowest levels.

I waited till we'd passed the town, had lost sight of Jo and Jeff in the car behind us, and were riding through the wooded spots that came along this other, long way home.

When will you stop? I wondered. When will you stop the way you used to and pull over to the side? And the thought of his stopping became the biggest thing in the world.

I can't go back, I pleaded silently. I can't go on with the evening and the small talk. Turn your head. Look at me. Put your hand out and touch me. Let me see what your mouth does, and your eyes. Give me something. Give me anything.

The car slowed down, nosed into the trees, and ground to a standstill.

I stopped thinking. It was all the body again, as it had always been before: a deep sigh because I couldn't breathe; an indrawing of muscles; the kind of thing that happens at the moment of Ordeal: a dependence on tightening: if I pull myself together, if all the parts of me are closed and hard—it will hurt less: the fall in the plane, the smash of the bullet, the dentist's drill.

'What are you going to do?' I asked, in a voice that wasn't my own.

'Do?' He turned; but his full face was even more impassive than its profile. 'I'm not going to do anything.'

'Oh.'

And that should have ended it; that should have kept me sitting there, on my side, till he backed out and started for home again; just sitting there, not moving over. But I did move over.

I put my hand on him; and then I felt him coming out to meet me: the simplest shape. and yet the form of grandeur: the Obelisk; the Bird in Space; the flowerless

stem; candles on an altar; the pipes of the organ in St Patrick's at Eastertime.

Hands have no pride, no dignity. Once I touched a Breughel at the Metropolitan, and I'll never forget the astonishment and dismay in the voice of the guard as he came up behind me and said: Madame! What are you doing?

—Or the dream, so many years ago, before the children: recurrent, insistent, frightening, but vaguely understood: each child of sleep brought forth in birth; fortunate, blessed, safe against its own desire—without hands!

I willed for him to have me then: not the half-way, mid-way, other-ways of all our secret, wrong-way lovings; but this time, and for the first time, everything. I willed it, not saying a word, as you will the weather, the spins of roulette wheels, and the ends of wars: if I care enough, if I want enough, then the Someone or the Something must let it be so.

He turned the key, snapped off the lights, and suddenly I was smothering in his arms. 'Come on!' he said. 'Come on!'

What am I? I wondered irrelevantly, remembering an old game of Impressions. Who is the person I have in mind? What shape is she? What time of day? What season? What music? What period of art? The music was a horn-blare; and the art an abstraction: patterned circles pierced by sharp protrusions; red, blue, yellow; blatant as a cry. What time of day? What time of night? What season of the year? The title of what book is she? The settings of what play . . . ?

He was over me then, arms braced against the top of the seat behind me, stabbing without mind and direction. And as I tried to guide him he said Oh, Jesus—and it was over before it began.

'I'm sorry,' I kept telling him. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry!'—

though it didn't make sense: he should have been saying it to me!

'I've got a big day on Monday,' he said, hands on the wheel and the motor purring. 'I have to see some guy the firm is wooing. What's the best place for dinner?'

'Nedick's,' I answered wearily.

When we got back to the party I passed Jo quickly, barely able to wave. I went straight through to the john and washed. A few people rattled on the knob, but I stood there, letting the water run. And I discovered then that somewhere in the car I had lost my watch. . . .

It ended there. And even though it was Frannie's I copied it that last night in her house, folded it in half, and put it into my bag; because somehow—it was mine too.

Then I dragged the valises out and headed downtown.

It wasn't his, I kept thinking as I drove. She was telling me the truth. It wasn't his. It never could have been. He wasn't up to—even that. . . .

EIGHTEEN

It was after my first day at Clarke that I came home to find a letter from Frannie in my box. Bewildered by the plethora of duties I had discovered to be mine, her Air Mail envelope showing bluely through the metal pigeon-hole carried the uplift of an oasis, of a *deus ex machina* lowered from the skies to snatch me from utter devastation. I opened it right there in the vestibule, unable to wait till I got upstairs.

My last-minute lachrymosity, she wrote, had, of course, disturbed her—to the point of passing up three-fourths of the Weinricks' farewell banquet; but on second thought, tears had their therapeutic advantage and the fact that mine were so close to the surface would surely save me several grand on an analyst's couch. I really should try it, she advised; it would be a shame to waste the chance for such economy.

The kids were fine, she went on; and the roaches had not, to date, made their initial attack. But it was always that way; they were slob about plane schedules and were never ready to advance till a week or so after a tenant's arrival.

She had already been to the book shop in Hamilton where she had picked up several English authors ('I mean their novels,' she hastened to add.) The jacket blurb on one of Angela Thirkell's extolled this lady storyteller to

the heavens, ending with: *She is, beyond a doubt, another Trollope . . .* 'Of all people!' Frannie supplemented. 'But then, one can never be sure about the British!'

After three more pages of similar fare she finished less lightly: Marc had received a call from his office and was flying home the following day. 'He says it won't be for long,' she wrote, 'but I can think of happier plights than solitary maroonment on an island of Romance for even a few star-lit nights. The place is crawling with honeymooners, and even my thirteen-year-old baby-sitter informs me she's pregnant (not that one expects virgins at two shillings an hour . . .). He'll be there by the time you get this, so call him and nag him into a fast return.' Signed:

Cheerio!

'Rawther Perturbed'

On the Saturday of the Wingo Bazaar I woke up feeling low. (I'd dropped in on some town friends named Herman the night before and had drunk myself into a phony display of *joie de vivre* in sheer defence against their sympathy. Meaning well, they had made a big deal of wracking their brains for the name of every bachelor, divorcé, and widower in New York.) I did drive out to Wingo, though: anything would be better, I felt, than hanging around brooding all day.

'Hi, Jo!' came voices from every direction as I inched my way through the crush on the playground.

'Marvellous this year!' said an especially enthusiastic Volunteer Mother, collaring me. 'We'll make piles! Probably get a new bus out of it!'

I was amazed to find how quickly my loyalties had

faded; how little I cared if Wingo transported its small fry in a new bus—or an old garbage truck. But I nodded and smiled gaily.

Then: 'Hello,' said a deep, gentle voice; and I turned to face Bill Brecker behind me. Untall, unbeautiful, there was a kind of strength in the close-cropped curling brown hair and the large, flat, sprawling features; a kind of power, yet a kind of kindness. We talked for a few minutes and then he asked, 'Are you going to be busy after this? There's a staff dinner dance at the hospital and I didn't want to go alone. But if you're——'

'I'd love to,' I said. 'It's just that I made this tentative date with somebody and I'm not quite sure if——'

'When will you be sure?'

'Later,' I lied. 'He's here, so I'll find out, and——'

Refusals like that are odd: unbased and strangely automatic. I thought of all the other things I'd got out of in my life: good things, nice things, attractive—yet, somehow, not attractive *enough*, and so—turned down, without real reason, without my ever clearly knowing why.

'Okay,' Bill said. 'I'll check with you before I leave.'

It was somewhere around the hot-dog booth that I heard the unmistakable roar of Peggy Potter Fredericks. Peggy, a well-known labour lawyer, had sent her children to Wingo many years back, but, as with all things, had embraced the place as one of her numerous Causes. Actually, I had first run into her during my Washington era, where, having left her soft-spoken Sutton Place husband at home, she was whirl-windingly busy outshouting staunch males in a government investigation.

In view of Marc's profession I had once asked Frannie

if she knew her. 'Peggy Fredericks?' Frannie had said without expression. 'Oh, sure. She's that dame with the built-in megaphone.'

Catching sight of me now, she waved a happy hand full of hot dog and flagged me down like a train. 'JO BRADFORD! Haven't seen you for AGES! GOOD you came! Hear you're LEAVING! Come on OVER!'

Timorously I edged in closer. 'Hi, Peg,' I said, my own voice a mere squeak by comparison. Round, blue-haired, and five-feet-one, there was something about Peg's cannon-ball delivery that knocked you senseless.

'WHERE's the gorgeous HUSBAND?' she demanded.

Several spectators averted their eyes and moved off. 'Pffft,' I answered simply.

Peggy's psychic machinery underwent a sequence of gear-shifts, leaving her with a sorrow no less intense than her previous joy. 'No . . .!' she groaned. 'Jo, don't TELL me! WHEN? WHY? What HAPPENED?'

'End of May,' I answered. 'Long story. . . . But it's nice,' I added, 'that you're *surprised*. . . .'

She stared at me, incongruously stilled as a storm sky robbed of thunder. Then, suddenly, she brightened. 'You know WHAT?' she said. 'GORDIE's here!'

'Gordie?'

'My BROTHER! GORDIE! He's in from PHILLY!'

'Oh,' I said. 'Gordon. The one that makes pens? I think you mentioned him last time I saw you '

She had already turned and was scanning the playground. 'GORDIE!' she exploded, spotting him somewhere in the crowd. 'Come on OVER here!'

And, emerging magically as Pan from a forest of human trees, Gordon Potter appeared. There is no reason to expect striking resemblances between siblings; but on the

other hand, I wasn't quite prepared for such startling dissimilarity. 'You called?' he asked, genie-like, bathing us both in a wide, easy grin. His voice played a flute to Peg's bassoon. His hair, close-cropped but still silken, was the no-colour of small soft animals; and over green, slanted eyes he wore glasses in dark shell frames. All this, plus his slender height, gave him the look of some unique species of tall, intellectual erlking.

'JO BRADFORD!' Peggy boomed. 'My brother, GORDIE!'

Gordon, hands stuffed into the pockets of seersucker trousers, rocked back and forth on the toes of his moccasins and smiled. 'Someone told me who you were when you came,' he said. 'You worked here last year—and your real name's Elizabeth?'

'Yes,' I answered vaguely, unable to take my eyes from his strangely piquant head, fully expecting to find his ears pointed and covered with flat fur.

And then a group of friends surrounded Peggy, and he and I were left, unofficially linked, to go our way.

'You do something with pens,' I said later, as we sat on a rock behind the Sixes building, sucking fresh lemons through candy straws.

'I make them. Real good ones. Real special?' He had a way of putting question-marks where periods should be.

'How did you get into *that*?' I asked.

He gave it some thought and then shrugged. 'Who knows? Woke up one morning five years ago and decided to quit my old job and make pens. *Pens*, a little voice said: *go make pens*. So I went and made them. And now I'm doing *awfully* well! They're remarkable. They don't smear at all, and they hardly *ever* run dry!'

I began to laugh.

‘What’s funny?’

‘I just thought of Frannie,’ I said. ‘When Frannie hears I met Peggy Fredericks’ brother and he manufactures pens, she’ll——’ I doubled up. I could hear her, doing one of her armchair analyses of the symbolic implication of Gordon’s unconscious choice of product. . . .

‘Who’s Frannie?’

‘Frannie Browne. This girl I know. You’ll have to meet her some day. You’d adore each other. She’s sort of like you—in a way.’

‘How?’

‘Well, green eyes. But something else—something intangible; kind of a—detachment from reality. She isn’t always that way, though. There are times when she can chuck all this gaiety and whimsy and stuff and become staggeringly—Machiavellian?’ Now *I* was doing it.

‘Let’s ditch this mob and go see her?’

‘Can’t. She’s in Bermuda.’

‘Well, that’s too far. But let’s go anyway?’

‘Where?’

‘You could drive me into town. I came out with Peg, but I have to get back to Philly tonight. I have a thing on for tomorrow.’

He reached out for my lemon rind and stuffed it into the half-eaten skin of his. ‘Let me throw these into the can,’ he said, getting up. ‘I can’t ever just drop a thing on the ground. I’m very—Civic-Minded?’

While I waited for him to come back, Bill Brecker walked over. ‘I take it you now know,’ he said. ‘The date for this evening: you have it, or you don’t have it.’

‘I have it,’ I answered.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘Maybe some other time. I’ll try

you—once more.’ There was a slight, almost imperceptible stress on the last phrase. He knew I’d sloughed him off; yet, he had no proof, so he was going to give me another chance. But there would be no long-term persuasions, as there would have been with Brad; no endless phonings, no setting himself up for endless rebuffs. With Bill it would be another chance: clearly, decisively: *just one*.

Gordon came back then and we left Wingo and drove into town. I told him about Brad: not all of it, of course, but simply that we had broken up. And he told me about his wife who wasn’t his wife any more. It just hadn’t worked out, somehow; nobody ever found out why. Now there was this other woman—the ‘thing’, in fact, that he had on for tomorrow; but no—nothing like that; only a sort of *friend*: much older than he; very understanding. You could tell her everything. You could stretch out on your back and look up at the ceiling and say all your thoughts; she just sat there and listened.

‘What is she?’ I asked. ‘An analyst?’

He grimaced like a little boy at a spoonful of castor oil. ‘Christ, no!’ he said. ‘I’ve had enough of *that*! Three years, almost; and *please* don’t remind me of it! The bastard just sat there mentally counting his twenty-five-dollar bills and saying, *Hhhhhhmmmmnnnn . . .!*’

He *was* like Frannie: awfully.

When we got to town I made noises about driving him to Peggy’s; but he said he was hungry, so I suggested that he come down to my apartment for a snack.

He was enchanted with the place; he was enchanted with the ham sandwich; he was enchanted in general; and, like so many people who are busy being enchanted, he was enchanting.

When he kissed me I knew how long it had been since

I'd been kissed; how long since anything; how terrible it had been to live like that; how nothing mattered but that he stay; let me be the way I was; not question it; not make me explain; not make me apologize for my lack of control, lack of discretion, lack of dignity. There weren't any of those big, crazy divides with him: *men are this way, women are that way; this is done, that is not done; or: what am I doing?*—and: *I'll-hate-myself-in-the-morning.*

It was only later, after it was over, when he got up and found a cigarette and sat down in the armchair, that he began to talk: began to let the world get in and tear him to pieces.

'It'll be hell before we're through,' he said; and again I thought of Frannie; because the freedom was gone, and the heedlessness; and so quickly, so much the way it could happen to Frannie, he had become tangled in a hundred sudden webs of complexity.

'I don't know how to say it,' he went on slowly, putting out the cigarette he had just lighted, 'but I don't—do anybody any *good*.'

I stretched a little, lying there on my chintzy spread, feeling sleepy with love. 'You do *me* good,' I said.

'Yes—now. With this. But not later. This isn't enough of a way to do good to anybody. It doesn't last. Later—there has to be more.'

'I don't want any more.'

'You will, though. And I won't have it to give. Because this is the only thing I've got; it's the only thing I do well.'

I laughed. 'That's silly. You make remarkable pens! You just told me so a few hours ago.'

He looked almost angry. 'That's not what I mean,' he said. 'I'm not talking about pens. I'm talking about me.'

But you'll see. Later, you'll see. It's like one of those cliffs in Bermuda where your friend is. I've been there, and I know: there are these cliffs there, all along the ocean. They're big and strong and when you climb up and sit on them you feel you're safe because nothing can ever happen to change them. But every time the waves crash against them, a little more of them gets lost; and one day they won't even be there at all. That's what you'll find out about me: whatever happens, I keep becoming less; not more.'

I got up and made us two drinks and handed him one. 'You know Colette?' I asked. 'There's this story she wrote, about a woman named Julie. And the rare thing about Julie is: after she's made love with a man she doesn't want or need to sit around talking about it. Right now—that's me. You were so free before; so giving and taking; but now you're trying to pull it all apart. Can't you just leave it the way it was? You keep reminding me of Frannie. Frannie's like that. She gets hold of a thing, really gets hold of it, and it's whole and it's marvellous. But then she just can't seem to stand letting it alone. So she hacks it all to smithereens, and half the time you don't know what she's doing, or why.'

(Again I heard her: *Please don't go to sleep! Stay up a minute, won't you? Tell me, Marc! I have to know! I have to know or I'll die! . . .*)

'You talk an awful lot about Frannie,' Gordon said, pushing her voice from my mind.

'Do I . . . ? I don't! I've mentioned her name just three times, maybe, in the whole time I've known you! She's a friend of mine. Don't you ever talk about your friends?'

'It's not how many times. It's the *way* you talk about her. It's as if you never quite do anything, never quite *are* anything, except in some kind of juxtaposition to Frannie.'

'You're crazy,' I said.

He got up and came towards me. 'Again?'

'Yes, again,' I said. 'But this time take your glasses off!'

'No!' he cried, suddenly distraught. 'I can't! I have to see, I have to see!'

He stayed till about 4 a.m. Then he went back to Peggy's house. But he wasn't going to go to Philadelphia the next day after all. What's-her-name wouldn't mind: she was just a maiden-aunt surrogate, he said; just someone to weep with, and he didn't feel much like weeping now. He'd have breakfast at Peg's to make it look decent and then he'd come back to me and we could spend the whole day together.

Even though I knew I'd see him within a couple of hours it wasn't easy when he left. I couldn't sleep. So I dragged out the typewriter I'd borrowed from Clarke to type business notices in my spare time and began banging out a letter to Frannie.

Frannie darling, I wrote:

Get me off the Lovelorn List and page Polly Adler!—His name is Gordon Potter. You know Peggy Potter Fredericks—well, her brother. At the Wingo Bazaar, of all places! Knowing Peg, you can't possibly picture Gordon. Can you compare a slender Spring rain with a small round tornado?

It's now after 4 a.m.; and God only knows I should by now have transferred to the arms of Morpheus; but I'm just too excited to do anything but remember what it was like, and what it's going to be like in a few hours when he

comes back. It's never been this way—not for me, not for anyone. There is nothing the man won't do. Your beloved Edna returns to me with lines I never knew I knew: . . . drowned in love and weedily washed ashore. . . . What's the rest of that anyway? . . . As I looked at him, after—he made me think of the lean, lithe harlequins in that Picasso portfolio you once showed me. . . .

It rambled on like that for pages and pages, growing more and more graphic as I lost the inhibitions of writing and began to feel that Frannie was with me; that I was actually talking to her.

That morning when Gordon came back we set out in my car for a drive to the shore, stopping for lunch at a tavern along the way. We drank a lot, but there was an intense-ness which kept us from getting crocked.

By one the sun had vanished and the sky turned grey; and when we reached the first beaches of Long Island they were practically deserted. We parked after a while and found a sheltered, hollowed-out place among the dunes. Neither of us had thought about bathing suits, but there was an old blanket in the baggage compartment of the car and it served to cover us respectably the few times during the afternoon when people came by. We even managed to make it to the water for swimming. It was beautiful being wet with love and the sea and the warm rain that had started. I thought of Frannie: she had told me how she and Marc had made love on the empty beaches of Bermuda in other summers; and it seemed almost as if her memory, shared with me, had brought me to a kind of reliving of something which had first been hers.

Dear, dear Frannie, I thought, stretched out beside Gordon on the sand; the following letter is a thank-you note. . . .

'You're so soft,' he said suddenly, breaking into my fantasy. 'You're safe. You're not a person; you're a place. I can get lost in you.'

I turned on my side and reached my arms around his neck, pulling his mouth against mine. 'Get lost,' I said.

' . . . *drowned in love,*' I mused, after we had swum again, '*and weedily washed ashore. . . .* Do you know that? What comes next?'

'I don't know.'

Suddenly I did: *There to be fretted by the drag and shove, at the tide's edge, I lie—these things and more. . . .*

'Are you willing,' Gordon asked, facing me on the blanket, 'for all this not to work out?'

I yawned.

'You think you don't care now,' he went on. 'But later you'll care. Women can't, without caring sooner or later; and that's when it all goes to pieces.'

'In August I'll be forty-seven,' I told him, hating the sound of it, but needing to get it said. 'I'm not a child any more. I'm 'way past Love's Young Dream, and things *don't* work out. Accepting it is being grown-up, isn't it? Stop worrying. Stop looking for trouble.' I picked up a handful of sand and let it sift down on to his arm.

'You don't know me,' he said. 'That's the way it always is: everybody feels so sure about everything; except—they don't know me; and then, later, they're let down.'

He sat up and I sat up too and we began getting dressed.

'You know about my analysis?' he asked. 'Do you know anything about it?'

'You mentioned it yesterday.'

'No—I mean do you know how it works; what it means to go through it?'

'A little.'

'Well, do you know why I quit?'

'Why?'

'Because I got too scared to find out any more. He was a good guy: in Philly; Gromberg. He was really great. Personally, I couldn't stand him. But that was just part of *me*, and what's wrong with me. We spent over two years at it, and I was coming along wonderfully. But that was only the beginning. In the beginning it's easier. You have a million things to say and you talk your lungs out. But then one day you get to the end of the anecdotes and you can't say anything at all. And that's where the true beginning begins: when you reach the part you didn't know was there, because whatever it is has been too awful to be aware of. So then you gird up your emotional loins and go on to find out; or you don't. I didn't. I quit. . . .'

'So you quit. What's so bad about that? You were all right, weren't you?'

'Oh, sure—I was fine! I was so happy to get out of there I almost *liked* the bum that last day! I wanted to throw my arms around him! I wanted to kiss him! And then I walked out of the building and ran into a kid on a tricycle and broke my ankle! After it healed I wanted to go back to Gromberg and tell him about it. . . . But I didn't.

'Peg thinks I ought to finish some time,' he went on in the car when we'd started for home. 'She's really a bug on it. She was so mixed up she couldn't work for five years, so she went to somebody who fixed it for her, and

now she must be earning thirty grand a year. Have you ever heard of Paige? A woman?"

'Yes. Frannie mentioned her once.'

'Well, Peg thinks a lot of her; but they rarely take two people from the same family. Besides, I'd have to commute. And then, actually I'd hate to start again with somebody new. If I went anywhere it would be back to Gromberg—if he'd have me. The truth is: he never liked me. I mean, I know they're not supposed to act like your bosom pal, but he seemed even more unfriendly than he had to be and I always had the feeling that he didn't—like me. I think he had a thing about being Jewish and he put up this big front about not giving a damn about you just to make sure you wouldn't hate him first. You know—like Jews do?'

'I don't think Jews do much that other human beings don't do,' I said.

'You know something, Jo?' He laughed. 'I love you. I love you more than I love anybody. But listen now—don't ever *count* on it!'

I dropped him off at Peggy's. She was having a cocktail party and he felt he ought to get there in time to say hello. After that he was going back to Philadelphia.

'I'll come over on Friday,' he said. 'Straight to your apartment. Peg doesn't even have to know I'm in town.'

NINETEEN

THE week slid past. What with my job, and the typing of vast treatises to Frannie, I was kept busy night and day. The writing was becoming a real thing with me. Before this I had often stated that I was one of those people who couldn't construct a simple declarative sentence. Now I found myself able to go on for pages, loving, even with critical eye, every purple, prurient paragraph that came out of me.

On Thursday I got an answer to my Saturday-night one (there were two before that, but not in answer).

Dear Jo, it went:

Your manuscript arrived. I know you and I aren't particularly shackled to the dictates of Society, but I seem to recall something about a pretty fat fine, or even an honest-to-God jail sentence, for using the mails as a transport for pornography. Those last three pages might well have put Spillane out of business; to say nothing of where they have put me: on my cliff, to be exact—extending several yards into a crashing sea; just me, your letter, and a flock of hovering gulls who, thanks to Heaven's protective attitude towards dumb beings, can't read English. You're really giving, Mrs Bradford! The trouble is: I can hardly, at the moment, think what to do with it!

Where the hell is Marc? Have you heard from him? I

haven't: not one lousy word since he left. He's one of those glass-arm boys; but wouldn't you think he'd shoot the six bucks and call me?

Tonight I'm feeling insanely lonely. I can't use the phone here for overseas communication because you have to be the owner of the cottage to do that; but if he doesn't come through by tomorrow I'll bike into Hamilton and call him from the Telephone Company.

The kids have been fine, and fun; but after your letter, and the responses evoked by same, one finds it hard to consider children in the light of total Need Fillers. ...

Forgive the breast-beating. This is a time of great joy for you, and I'm happier than I can tell you that you're back on the market again. Gordon sounds incredible. In fact, if it weren't for the inescapably real and brilliant inclusion of physical detail, I would think him the product of some madly eroticized fantasy.

As for the lines you quoted: they're from a sonnet in Fatal Interview. It goes: Night is my sister, and how deep in love. . . . And it ends:

Small chance, however, in a storm so black,
A man will leave his friendly fire and snug
For a drowned woman's sake, and bring her back
To drip and scatter shells upon the rug.
No one but Night, with tears on her dark face,
Watches beside me in this windy place.

Just why that one, of all the other, certainly more appropriate ones, should enter your mind at a time like that, I have no idea. I imagine, though, that someone like that Helen Paige person might become self-supporting on that one issue alone.

I was sunning myself this afternoon and, for some reason, the bitch moved right in and took over. I haven't thought of her for years, barring a mention or two of her

name. I heard her speak, ages ago, at one of the schools; and she struck me as the kind of dame I'd like to invite to a cocktail party (though, God knows, not to mine!).

I stopped reading at that point. Gordon had dropped Paige's name on Sunday. The subtle threads which seemed constantly to be connecting Gordon and Frannie were beginning to get me. I sat there feeling actually eerie. But then, that was the sort of psychological trap you always fell into with people like them. The Neurosis, I decided, was, in spite of the mystical auras haloed about its head by the Neurotics themselves, no less contagious than the common cold.

I picked up the letter again, finished reading it, and answered it promptly. Thanks for the Millay, I wrote; why I had thought of that one, I couldn't explain; but Paige seemed to be her dame, not mine—and would she kindly refrain from suggesting that *I* become her sole support!

As for Marc: I would call him, I promised, in the morning. Meanwhile, if things got too tough there were always Bermuda's American and British Military Bases which might offer a positive smorgasbord of male substitutes to tide her over.

And then I ended with a supplementary run-down on the previous Sunday at the beach with Gordon, which poured forth, to my delight, like something straight out of Hemingway.

For all the work I was able to do on Friday, Clarke might have hired an imbecile. I did call Marc, though. Due to the case he was on he would have to be in New

York a while longer, so we made a dinner date for Monday night—at Veronica's.

Veronica's is a small dark hole in the Village, jammed nocturnally with a crowd of beautiful boys. Packed around the bar like silvery sardines, they sing, when the mood is high, enchantingly vulgar parodies of show tunes to the accompaniment of a really impressive male pianist.

The four of us, when there still were four of us, had stopped in for drinks several times that past year, after dinner at the Juniper. Frannie adored the joint. But Marc, not caring about that kind of music anyway, had always complained about the smoke in his eyes and dragged us home.

I was surprised when he suggested it as a meeting-place; but perhaps he was making a remote-control gesture of love to Frannie in her absence.

Anyhow, we jotted it down on our memo pads for Monday night; which left me with the rest of Friday to wait to hear from Gordon. He hadn't said he'd phone, but I thought he might. I had dropped him at Peggy's rather abruptly and the plans for our forthcoming weekend had been made hurriedly.

But he didn't call all day, and by the time I got home from the office I had the agonizing premonition that he wasn't going to show up at all. The feeling became more justifiable as the hours went by. At about nine I broiled a couple of lamb chops; but I could barely nibble, so I began to drink instead.

By ten I was stewed on rye and misery. The room was stifling that night. I put the window up, but I had all my clothes off—so I had to keep the curtains closed, and they stopped the air completely. I started a letter to Frannie, but my new-found talent could not surmount the

block of my despair; there were now no words with which to express my feelings, and I wound up tearing it to shreds.

I parted the curtains then, and turned the lamp off; but even the light coming from other windows across the courtyard seemed to add weight to the atmosphere. Lying on the bed, I watched the dim patterns it cast on the ceiling and thought a thousand fitful, hopeless thoughts.

When the phone rang I grabbed it. But it wasn't Gordon. It was Brad. Some friendly helper had given him my number. He was drunk as a loon, and crying. The sound of him tore into me like a saw, and I hung up.

I don't know when I first became aware of the noise outside the window. It started with a kind of scraping, like the claws of some small animal dragging along the iron slats of the fire escape. A cat, perhaps; the alleys were full of them; and this one might have climbed up in search of food.

But then it stopped, and for a few minutes there was complete silence.

When it began again it was louder: the kind of dull, thudding thump an arm or leg might make against a wall or railing. I felt a real twist of panic then. I got up from the bed and stood beside it, staring at the window.

'What is it?' I whispered, strangling with fear. 'Who's there?'

When his leg came over the sill I screamed.

In seconds he was in the room and running for the lamp switch. 'Shut up,' he hissed.

The sudden light blinded me. Then I saw him, and sat down on the bed and began to cry.

'Stop,' he said softly. 'Stop, stop, will you? I didn't mean to scare you, Jo; I swear I didn't!' He came over and sat down next to me and held my head against his

chest. His arms were somehow reassuring, and I did stop, soon.

'I almost died,' I said. 'You can kill a person with fright; do you know that, Gordon?'

'I didn't mean to, Jo. Honestly, I didn't mean to.'

I got up and put a bathrobe on and sat down again, away from him, in the chair.

'I'm sorry, Jo,' he was saying. 'I didn't think it would come out this way. . . .'

'How long were you out there?' I asked.

'A while. A while, I guess.'

'Why? What were you doing?'

'Nothing. Please don't be sore.' The expression in his eyes melted me and I went over to him and sat on the floor with my arms around his knees. 'What is it, Gordon?' I asked. 'What's wrong?'

He slid down beside me and smiled. 'I told you,' he said, suddenly at ease, like a child who knows that whatever he has done will be forgiven. 'There are things about me that are—unresolved. Anyway, it isn't serious.'

'Have you done it before?'

'Oh, a few times. Not often.'

'To be funny, or scare someone, or what?'

'Well, tonight I thought it was going to be funny. But I guess, basically, voyeurs aren't funny.'

'Is that what you are?'

He laughed; and the elfin quality I had first seen in him at Wingo seemed to come over him again. 'In the book,' he said, 'I think it says that you aren't a thing till you go and act it out, or become overt about it. Well, I've acted it out—on occasion; so I guess I rate the title.'

I wanted to ask him when he had done it before; where; and with whom. Had they been strangers? Had he simply

run into stray opportunities here and there—as anyone might? Or had he gone in search of them? There's a little of everything in all of us, isn't there? Scratch a human, and what do you find?—the little girl, the little boy, the little thief, the little liar, the little murderer. . . . What was *I*, standing in the hall that night, listening to the secret voice of Frannie? What was *I*, going through the desk, reading the words that were hers? What had *I* been as a child, sitting at the top of the stairs, watching the grown-ups in the living-room, or crouching at my parents' bedroom door to hear my mother say STOP, and to know my father's eternally-accepting and never-fighting silence?

I wanted to talk to Gordon about it; but I didn't. He was here now, with me. We had a whole week-end ahead, to be together; and I didn't ask him how he felt, or what he thought, or which part, or how much, of anything he was. I didn't ask him because I was tired of finding out things—things which, once found out, I couldn't really understand—but to which I ended up in some strange, compelling way, tied hand and heart myself. There was that pull in people like Gordon, and Frannie, and so many others I had somehow put myself among: an attractiveness, a charm, a sensitive *thinking* thing which conjured up, by its own power, a beautiful but insidious embrace from which there was no escape. While exposing their innermost beings, in a gesture of warmth and faith, they forced you, ultimately, to face the inner being of yourself. You didn't want to. You didn't want to at all. But when the time came for you to pick up your marbles and go home, it was too late: you already loved them.

'Come on,' I said. 'I don't care what you're called, or

why. I don't care what's resolved, or what, in a world itself made up of dangling ends, can't ever be answered. You got here. I might have died if you hadn't. Try the transom next time; or the keyhole; or the drain in the sink. Just appear. I don't care how!

We spent two days and three nights locked up together beyond the reach of reality. We were never apart for a minute. We called a drug store when we were hungry and had food sent in; on Saturday night we washed our clothes in the shower and hung them on the fire escape to dry; when it rained we shut the window and lived without air; when the bed was hot and tumbled we made love on the floor. The thing was: we didn't need anyone or anything but ourselves.

'Don't answer it,' I said, when the phone rang on Sunday morning.

'Then you,' he said. 'You have to.'

'Oh no I don't. Just let it ring.'

'You can't. They know you're here. They always know when you're here, and they keep on calling.'

So I picked it up and it was Bill. He had met Jeri on the street, and she had known my address.

No, I told him; not this afternoon. I was busy. No, not tonight either. Next week? My plans were not yet made. The week-end? No; that was almost definitely filled.

'All right,' he said, gently, but with a firm finality.

I knew he would never call again. The chance (for what?), the out (to where?) was closed. But who cared?

Who ever cares when what she has is what she wants and the future seems a million years away? The world is filled with grasshoppers. I wasn't, and am not, the only one.

When I left him at the station early Monday morning the break was one of those exquisite ones: the hurt doesn't matter because there's a part of you that wants to hurt, and proves you're alive.

'Soon?' I asked.

'Yes. Very soon.'

'When?'

'Soon.'

I went to the office then, walking to it through the hot streets; loving the heat; loving a policeman on the corner; and a newspaper vendor; and a man inside a sandwich sign advertising the opening of a new coffee shop.

I thought of Frannie. Once I'd asked her how many men she'd really been in love with, and she'd answered, 'Oh, hundreds. A guy named Rocky who used to park my car in town when I had to go in for vitamin B shots; when I told him I wasn't coming any more he said: *I'll miss you*. A truck driver who looked down from his truck into my convertible and said: *That's a pretty car, and it's got a pretty owner*. A man on the street who said he came from Ohio, and could I tell him where Washington Square was; I did, and he smiled, and said: *You're very sweet*. That diaper man who liked my 'Summertime' record, and the laundryman who takes the sheets off the bed, and the milkman, and the grocery boy who puts the

food away. Some guy who drove his car up alongside mine on Fifth Avenue around the museum and rolled his window down and yelled: *Hey, where'd you get that crazy orange sweater?* I almost told that one I loved him, but something wouldn't let me say it, and then I lost him in the traffic and felt like crying. About thirty-four fellows who've slowed their cars down at the kerb while I was walking, to give me that questioning look. And approximately eighty-one others standing in front of drug stores or pin-ball dives who whistled when I went by because I have nice legs.

'Those are the men I've really been in love with,' she said. 'Not because they married me, or supported me, or gave me children, or went to bed with me, or even knew my name; but just because they were men who saw a girl and responded to her without thinking about it; responded to her because they needed and wanted to; said to her: *You are a girl*—and made her feel good about being one.'

When I got to the office I couldn't work, so I wrote a long letter to Frannie, telling her about Gordon, and our week-end together. As I wrote it, I relived it, all of it, exactly the way it happened, with nothing left out.

'You sick?' asked one of the instructors, leaning over my desk, peering into my face.

'No,' I said. 'I'm not sick.'

After work I went home to get dressed and then went out to meet Marc at Veronica's. He was there ahead of me, waiting at a little table in the gloom. I kissed him

hello, and he kissed me back; and we ordered martinis, and shrimps that were canned, and two of the worst steaks anyone ever tasted.

While we were eating, the piano player came out of one of the back rooms and stopped at our table. 'Hi,' he said. 'It's been months. Where's the other pair?'

He didn't know which pair belonged to which pair, but it didn't matter, and I said, 'We're not sure where he is; and she's in Bermuda.'

'Oh, nice,' he said. 'Very, very nice. I bought a sun-lamp last week so I could get a tan. Then I went up to see my mother and she told me I looked magenta. . . .'

We laughed.

'Funny?' he went on. 'No. Tragic. But I guess it's better than just common old ordinary *red*. . . . Well, what do you want me to play for you?'

'Anything you want,' I said. 'It's Frannie who has songs she can't live without; not us.'

'Okay; let's play one for Frannie then.' He stood there meditating a minute. 'I remember,' he said finally. 'I remember what Frannie likes.'

He went over to the piano and sat down and began playing in that slow, effortless way of his; and one of the boys around the bar broke away from the crowd and walked up to lean against the table beside him and sing it. He was a beautiful boy with a black sleeveless sweater over his white shirt, and a dusty-blue tie. He was the kind of boy who should have gone to Princeton, but, for reasons of his own, had come to Veronica's instead. He sang the way Frannie wanted people to sing: not with a voice, but with an understanding. He sounded like Chet Baker.

Let me love you, came the words. *Let me say that I*

do. If you'll lend me your ear, I'll make it clear—the way that I do. . . .

When he was all through, Marc said, 'Jesus.'

'Ditto Jesus,' I said. 'But you picked the place.'

'I thought *you* liked it.'

Then I told him I'd heard from Frannie and asked him if he had.

'Oh, sure. Almost every day.'

'Have you answered?'

'I'm lousy at letters. She knows that. She's the writer in the family, not me.'

'What does she say?'

'Mostly funny stuff. You know Frannie. Funny. A thing last week about making a macaroni-and-cheese dish for the kids, called: *Arsenic and Old Arsenic*; plus a philosophical comment on how it was too bad Alice B. Toklas hadn't thought to name the Gertrude Stein Cookbook: *A Roast Is a Roast Is a Roast*.'

We struggled with the steaks for a while. Then: 'She mentioned she might call you. Did she?'

'Yes,' he said. 'Several days ago. We talked for six minutes.'

'What did she say?'

He raised an eyebrow; then he smiled. 'What's new with *you*?'

'When are you going back there?'

'Another week or so. It's an important case. If it pans out the way I hope, it could mean a lot to me. We'll see. Next week, maybe. What *is* new with you?'

I told him about Gordon and he seemed pleased.

'Of course, it can't work,' I said.

'Why not?'

'If he ever does remarry, it'll be someone young.'

You know—the dewy look, the fresh approach. Me—I’m just a phase; just someone to work out a few things on.’ It took saying it aloud to Marc to make me see how true it was.

‘I wish I knew somebody,’ he said. ‘A nice sane guy in his fifties; solid business; couple of teen-age kids, maybe; home every night at six; and not too *beautiful!*’

‘I’d be bored to death.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I’m sure you would be. Tell me: what is it with you and the misbegotten?’

‘Just because *you’re* so well adjusted doesn’t mean everybody else has to be,’ I told him. ‘The misbegotten can be lovely, sensitive people. . . . And why don’t you write to Frannie?’ I added. ‘How well adjusted can you *be*? Don’t you *miss* her?’

And he said, ‘Yes. I miss her. I went to a party in Meade’s Manor on Saturday night and got crooked to the ears so I wouldn’t miss her so much. Then I went home and started writing her a letter. I didn’t finish it. Maybe I will, and maybe I won’t. But I miss her.’

It was a great deal, coming from Marc.

‘You’re really lonely, aren’t you?’ I said. And he nodded.

We left right after dinner and he walked me home. When we got to the door and I had my key out I thought of asking him in for a nightcap. But something told me not to. I’d been with lonely men before, and loneliness brought up too many other things. ‘Good-bye,’ I said. ‘Call me if you have a minute and tell me how your case comes out.’

‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘And good luck with Gordon.’

It was still early and I wasn't tired, so I wrote to Frannie. I told her some more about Gordon and ended with a report on my dinner with Marc:

He misses you like crazy, I said. The poor tortured guy doesn't know what to do with himself without you. Believe it or not, I got the feeling he'd have even settled for me! I wouldn't let him come in for a drink. I'm trammelled with guilt over it because he looked as if he needed one. But I figured it was safer not to. He doesn't seem to know exactly when he can fly back to you . . .

There was another of hers on the following day. It was a long one, written in the form of a musical comedy outline; and weird as hell. The characters were a Blind Eye, a Deaf Ear, and a Mute Mouth. The sets were made up of staircases built over an ocean on which the cast could only walk *down*. The songs were parodies from Broadway shows: the finale was one from *Annie Get Your Gun* with a switch on the last line so that it read: *I got found . . . but look what I lost!* And the whole business was called: *Best Foot Backward*.

It was all terribly clever, I was sure; but when I tried to answer I found myself incapable of calling it anything but 'interesting'. . . . Of course, the fact that I didn't always understand *all* of Frannie *all* of the time was not surprising. To understand a mere part of a girl like that seemed sufficient in itself to feed the ordinary mortal's ego.

Gordon came back that evening, just as I had finished my letter. It was a mid-week visit, much sooner than I had expected; and this time he came through the door. He

stayed the night and I cut work the next day to be with him.

It wasn't until he was leaving that he told me he wasn't going to be able to see me for a while. There was a big office-supply outfit in Los Angeles and he had to go out there in person and sell them on the Potter Pen. He would live with friends in Beverly Hills and spend several nice fat deductible weeks doing the high spots. The thought of not seeing me for so long was tearing his guts to ribbons, he said; but business was business, and taking the extra time made sense because he had to travel so far to get there in the first place.

'What would you like?' he asked, standing at the door. 'What can I send you?'

'Send me? Why should you send me anything?'

'I have to.'

'You have to?'

'I don't mean I have to. I mean I—*want* to.'

But he had put it the other way first; and the blood beat in my ears. It's strange about presents: you're supposed to love getting them—women, especially. But not, oh not, oh never, when they have to be given!

I thought of my father.

It had been my birthday. (How old was I then? Twelve? Thirteen? Fifteen?) The day had gone by and I hadn't seen him. And then he came home, quietly, tired, and late for dinner. *Where have you been?* asked my mother. *Everything's cold.* He didn't answer her. *Here,* he said, handing me a small brown package. I opened it on the table, beside his ruined supper, with my mother watching. It was Thoreau's *Walden*.

I tried to read it—then, and in later years; but I never could.

'Don't,' I said to Gordon now. 'There isn't anything I want, or that you need to give me.'

'Oh, just a little something. Just a——'

'Don't!' I blurted, almost crying. 'Please, please don't!'

'Silly,' he said, putting his arms around me. 'What a silly, silly thing you are!'

His kiss was warm and reassuring. But when he left I felt as if I had been blasted full of holes.

That night I wrote to Frannie again. Then, on the spur of the moment, another one—to my mother. Why, I'll never know. I told her about my split with Brad, without the details, of course: just that we had reached a point of incompatibility, and that now, finally, a parting of the ways seemed my only chance for happiness. It was hard, writing to her—but I forced it on for a page and a half. I had a good job, I told her; and a nice apartment; and everything was going to be fine. I ended by saying that I was thinking of her, and sent my best to Charles, her husband.

When, within mere days, I found her return envelope in my box, I clattered up the stairs to my armchair and a stiff drink before being able to open it.

It contained her Heart-felt Sympathy, a subtle hint of I-told-you-so, and a cheque for one hundred dollars.

I could have cried with anger, disappointment. What I had expected, I don't know. But I hadn't asked for money. She had given as she had always given before: the wrong thing, at the wrong time.

I could send it back to her. But as I looked at it lying on the table, I was struck with an idea:

Frannie dearest, I typed quickly.

A windfall of windfalls! One hundred smackers from my mother! Along with it, a rather cool and soul-crushing note, but nevertheless—a real, live cheque! And super-imposed across it in pure gold script, I swear I see the lovely word: BERMUDA!

Having charmed the seats off the higher-ups at Clarke, there's no reason to think I can't cadge a long week-end. If I left on a Thursday and came back on a Monday I could have three-plus days with you. Without Marc there you must surely have the extra space; and with Gordon gone for God knows how many weeks I'd like nothing better than a short stint of sunning, swimming, cliff-sitting, child-caring, bike-riding, and bull-throwing. . . .

When her answer arrived, concise, *sans* salutation, *sans* sign-off, it rocked the wind out of me:

Blue sky, blue sea, blue funk. . . . Your idea has Laboratory Merit, and I suggest you shove it up your test-tube. I can see you lolling there in blissful fantasy, wasting your mother's dough, lousing up your job at Clarke, and descending upon me with the naïve thought that your presence will save me from suicide. My God, Jo! Remind me to write a book called: The Leisure of the Theory Classes. In a word, my dreamy dreamer: if you insist on coming you will force me to evacuate this delightful little cottage and take up residence among the reefs, in the unrewarding company of bi-valves. . . .

TWENTY

FRANNIE never did get my next letter. It was returned to me weeks later. Instead she called me from Idlewild. There she was—bag, baggage, and brood; and Marc, having been paged by cable the day before, had driven over to pick her up.

‘Enough!’ she said on the phone, sounding near and gay. ‘Isles of Love are slow death on solos!’

I was overjoyed and forgot immediately the jolt of that last rejecting note of hers. ‘How long will it take you to get home?’ I asked.

‘We just got through Customs and they’re loading the station wagon. Something over an hour, I guess.’

‘I’ll be there waiting for you!’

‘But it’ll be ’way after midnight!’

‘So what? I’ll pack a grip and sleep over.’

‘How will you time it?’

‘I’ll leave here in a half-hour and be there when you arrive!’

‘It may take longer. Marc hasn’t eaten and we may stop for a sandwich.’

‘That’s okay. I’ll read and have a drink.’

She asked me to hold on for a second. I did; for several. Then she came back. ‘Marc says the doors are locked. You can’t get in.’

I sighed. 'Then I'll wait in the car. What is this? Don't you *want* me to come?'

'Oh, for God's sake,' she said. 'Of course I want you to come.'

I got there before they did. It was a warm night with a moon out and stars jamming the sky. I walked up and down the road a while and when I was tired I got into my car again and curled up in the back seat. In spite of my excitement I willed myself to sleep to make the time go faster.

I awakened to the sound of a brake in the driveway. As I leaped from my car door Frannie leaped from hers and we ran towards each other all the way across the lawn.

'You look marvellous!' I gasped through the tangle of embraces. 'Look at the colour!' In the silver light from the sky the skin of her face and arms was almost black.

She stretched her hands out and squinted at them fondly. 'I've got it all over—from head to toe!'

'Hey, break it up!' Marc called from the car. 'Help me get some of this stuff out!'

Blair and Petey sleepwalked into the house, and even Stu seemed to be knocked out enough not to know what was going on. Frannie and I got them to bed as fast as we could and then she, Marc, and I dragged the luggage in. After that I mixed us some drinks while Frannie changed into some shorts and the orange shirt I'd given her. When she came down to the den she looked at me for a minute. 'Your lipstick's smeared,' she said.

I rubbed the back of my hand across my mouth.

'There, on the side, and over on your cheek.'

'Hey,' I laughed. 'That's right—you kissed me, didn't you; without tightening up like a God-damned wire!'

'Yes . . .' she said slowly. 'I kissed you.'

I glanced up. 'Now look,' I told her, 'don't start getting *complicated*, will you? You just got here!'

'I'm not complicated.'

'Oh, Christ,' Marc said, 'here we go again. I've been driving for hours. Can't you save this crap for tomorrow? I'll take the kids to the office with me and you can contemplate your navels all day. Right now—I'm for bed.'

'In a bit,' Frannie said, lying down on the couch. 'We've got a lot to catch up on.'

'You mean you didn't *write* it all?'

'No. Not all. . . . Anyway, Jo has to give me the latest instalment on her sex life. Oh, wait—*listen!*' She began to laugh. 'I've got a new book title!: Biography of Gordon Potter—*Bon Voyageur!*'

'That's not fair,' I said. 'Gordon's got a lot more to him than *that!*'

'What—necrophilia? Beating? Corn cobs? Or that thing about waving burning newspapers over the supine torso?'

'You dog.'

She quieted. 'My morbid interest in Gordon,' she countered, 'has been forcibly fanned by *you*, sweetie. Those letters! I still have them! I'd have cremated them, but I felt it wasn't even safe to leave the ashes!'

Marc yawned.

'All right,' I announced, standing up. 'We'll get some sleep and talk tomorrow.'

'Thank you,' said Marc, with a stiff mock bow.

I left the den first, shutting the door behind me. When I

got upstairs I closed the door of my room. But the straight, open stair-well was a channel for sound; and I could have sworn, some ten minutes later, that I heard Frannie crying: brokenly, unceasingly—like someone who had lost her mind.

In the morning Marc left with the kids at about ten-thirty. I was awakened by a succession of bangs as they went through the screen door; and by the running of Frannie's bath water into the tub. I got up and took one too. When I was dressed I heard her moving around in Blair's room where we'd piled the unpacked bags the night before. I went in. She had nothing on. It was true about the sun-tan: she had it all over; and in the sunlight it was even more striking than it had been in the dark: there were parts of it that shone like bronze where she was still wet from her bath.

'Oh,' I said inanely.

'Oh,' she said, just as inanely, crossing her arms over her breasts. Then she brushed past me quickly and went into her own room to get dressed.

I fried us some eggs, reheated the coffee Marc had left, and carried it all into the den. When she came down I handed her a plate.

'Look at that Rouault,' she said, leaning towards it over the liquor cabinet. 'God, how I've missed that Rouault. If we ever went broke and had to sell it I think I'd——'

'Aren't you going to eat your eggs?'

'I'm not hungry. Do you want them?'

'Go on, eat them. Protein.'

'Here.' She brought the plate over to me and slid the eggs off it on to mine.

'I don't want to sound like your mother,' I said, 'but if you don't start eating like a normal human being you're going to starve to death.'

'Death by any cause frightens me not at all,' she intoned grimly, slinging the empty plate across the cabinet. 'Starvation, in fact, would seem tidier than most—if a bit on the slow side.'

I put my plate down. 'What is it?' I asked. 'What's on your mind?'

She walked back to the couch.

The curtains were still drawn from the night before, and the sun seeping through them held us both in a soft orange light.

She didn't answer me. Her silence lasted whole minutes; and, as happens in the midst of most waiting-silences, I became aware of the trivial sounds surrounding it: the splash of a hose on a neighbour's lawn; the grind of a tree-saw down the road; two dogs barking at each other; and the motors of three passing cars.

'Listen, Jo,' she broke through at last.

'I'm listening.'

'I'm tired to death of all this.'

'Of what?'

She looked up at me. Then she shook her head slowly. 'When are you going to stop that?' she asked.

'Stop *what*?'

'Stop asking *what*! Stop pretending you don't *know* anything! Stop living your life as if it were a dream or something—as if all you have to do is wake up to make it all go away and not matter any more!'

'Oh, Christ,' I said, 'don't tell me you're about to sermonize! Really, Frannie, if there's one thing about you that *does* drive me wild it's that *moralistic* thing you do. Half the time you're some crazy, rootless hoyden shouting Freedom from the hilltops; and then when you get people over to your side so they trust you and go along with it—you turn around and hit them over the head with a Bible! I swear, if you start Holy-Rolling me about Gordon, I'll scream!'

She leaned forward, shocked out of hesitation. 'Not Gordon, Jo,' she said with a quiet anger that annihilated the force of my own. '*Me.*'

'You?'

'Listen to me, Jo. I've just come back from a four-week nightmare. That I had the guts to come back at all amazes hell out of me. It would have been so simple the other way: one dive off that villainous cliff into the rocks; one big wave—and finished. But I couldn't do it. I had to come home. I had to get it *said*. That's the thing about people like us: we keep having to *say* things. One day we're going to talk ourselves right out of existence. There isn't going to be anything left of us to prove to the world that we were ever in it—except some God-damned echo of a million words! And you know what's even worse? When they get it all taped and try to decode it they aren't going to be able to. They'll chalk it up to the wind, or the rain, or a trick of the elements. They'll never understand it. They'll try for all of eternity—but they'll never understand it. And you know why? Because *we* didn't understand it *ourselves*!'

'That's beautiful,' I said, 'but what does it mean?'

She got up and went over to the cabinet. 'What time is it? I lost my watch a while back. . . .'

‘Yes. I know.’

‘Is it too early for a drink?’

I got us some ice-cubes and mixed two gins and soda. We were about a third down on them before she spoke again. ‘Listen,’ she began, seemingly fortified. ‘I sat on those cliffs like a sun-crazed lizard, trying to think of a way not to say it. I figured if there were just some way to keep quiet, just some way to go on as we’ve been going, without putting it into words—then maybe I could work it out the way *you* work things out: turn it all into some sort of bad dream that would vanish in the morning. But I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. . . .’

‘For someone who has to say everything,’ I put in, ‘you’re certainly doing a good job of saying nothing.’

She set her glass down and bent towards me, seeming to brace herself against the thing that was about to break over us. ‘All right,’ she said. ‘Stop—seducing me.’

I sat there staring, not believing I had heard her.

‘You see, Jo,’ she went on, ‘there isn’t any need to any more. You’ve—got it made.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘I’m saying what I had to say,’ she answered. ‘That I can’t stand fooling around any more. You’ve—got me.’

I was speechless.

‘It might have gone on for a while longer,’ she said, ‘if only I hadn’t been down there alone. I kept praying Marc would come back and, in some magical way, make it untrue. But he couldn’t come. The only thing that came and came and came and came were those letters!’

‘I was letting you know about Gordon,’ I broke in. ‘You *wanted* to know! You *know* you did! I was writing to you because you were my friend. I was giving you news!’

'You were giving me *yourself*,' she said. 'Can't you see that, Jo? Gordon was just some sort of vehicle you used to get *yourself* across to *me*.'

'You're out of your mind.'

'Am I? Tell me honestly, Jo: have you ever heard of a woman who could make love with a man as rapturously, as *completely* as you said you did with Gordon and then, three minutes after it was over, dash to a typewriter and send it all to some girl she knew? And I do mean *all*. Why should she do a thing like that, do you think?'

'Frannie,' I said, fighting to keep the quaver out of my voice. 'Frannie, you've gone mad!'

'Maybe. But not the way you think I have. I can stand it, that it's happened. I've known for a long while anyway. I've been living with it day after day—like you'd live with one eye, or an atrophied arm. You can get used to things like that—if people will let you. *That's* the big thing: if people will let you. Maybe I *have* gone mad—but not because of a dirty name. I've gone mad because—you're turning tail. And I'm in too deep now to get out alone!'

I flung my hand across the end-table by my chair and my drink went over. Neither of us moved to wipe it up. 'What do you want me to do?' I asked through my teeth. 'Marry you to make an honest woman of you?'

Her face began to give way. 'I want to cry,' she said. 'I want to cry so badly.'

'Well, cry,' I told her. 'I'd cry like hell if I were you!'

'I can't. It won't come.'

I couldn't stand seeing her that way. What comfort could one give or take from anger? I got up from the chair and went towards her, as I had gone to Gordon the night of the window, as I would have gone, and would still go,

to anyone or anything alone and stricken. 'You've got to get some help, Frannie,' I said, laying my hand on her shoulder. 'You've made up this whole thing in your mind. You know that, don't you?'

'No!' she shouted, striking my hand away. 'I didn't!' Then she folded on the couch, head buried in a cushion.

'You've got to get some help,' I repeated.

'Look, Jo,' she said a minute later, facing me again, 'can't you see how it's been for a year now? The thing with Brad? Can't you see how strange that was?'

'Yes,' I answered, going back to my chair. 'You, my best friend, took him right out from under me. *Strange* is putting it mildly.'

'I did,' she said, 'and that's where *I* went off. But what about you, Jo? What about the wife who does everything she can to make it easy . . .?'

'I? Make it easy?'

'Didn't you? Wasn't it you who sent me out for soda? Wasn't it you who wanted me to go upstairs and wake him? Didn't you hand him over on a platter every chance you got? When you *knew*, finally, what was going on, did you try to stop it? Did you write me off for the bitch I was? Did you break up the friendship? Did you even so much as get *angry*? No. And when the whole thing blew up in your face what did you do? You moved in here—with *me*!'

'That's ridiculous. That's——'

'Hold it, Jo, and listen: there's more. After you got here, what happened? Do you remember? You cooked, you cleaned, you took over the kids. There was Blair——'

'You're going to drag Blair into this?'

'Yes—Blair. I knew how you felt about little girls. I knew how much you'd always wanted one of your own,

and how you felt you couldn't—because of Brad. I saw the way you looked at her when she came into a room, and heard the tone of your voice when you spoke to her. One night I woke up and went in to see her. She wasn't there. I went into the boys' room, and she wasn't there either. Then there was a sound behind your door. You were saying something softly, and I heard you use her name. I knew: she was in there—with you. Do you know what all that did to me? You're going to laugh. You're going to roll on the floor. I began to have a fantasy; the God-damnedest fantasy in the world: *She wants my little girl*, I thought; *she needs my little girl. How sad, how heartbreaking; Jo who is so dear to me can't have the thing she wants most of all! How can I help her? What can I do?* And then I knew: *I'll give her one*, I dreamed. *I'll hope and pray and wish and believe; and in some strange and supernatural way, the miracle will come to pass: I will give Jo a baby girl; a real one; one that will grow inside her and be born and be her own!*

'That's fantastic, Frannie, and you know it!'

'Yes, I know it. I said it was a fantasy. But there were other things that weren't fantasies; they were real. Marc——'

'Marc?'

'The cooking, the cleaning, the caring for the children: what were you doing when you did all those things? You were showing *me* up as a child: proving me, in front of Marc, unworthy of a man. In that way, and in many others, you tried to separate us.'

'That's a lie!'

'Oh, is it? What about that sweet, motherly advice you gave me while I was down there on my cliff, going crazy: that kind and generous suggestion about filling my need

with the guys at the Military Bases? And the thing about Marc the night you had dinner with him: how you had the feeling he was ready to have it with you; how you wanted to ask him in for a drink, but felt it *safer* not to? I told him about that, last night in the car on our way back. You know what he said? He said he'd like to break your God-damned neck!

'Don't give me that, Frannie,' I said. 'You can trap the whole world with that clever tongue of yours, but I'm not buying a nickel's worth. You're sick. You're sick as a dog. I used to think you were neurotic. You're not. You're insane.'

'I'm sick,' she said quietly. 'But I know it. And that makes me a hell of a lot less sick than you.'

I looked to the window. The curtain across it seemed a barrier between us and reality. I yanked the cord and opened it. The sun poured in so fiercely I had to shut my eyes. When I could see again, she was sitting on the floor beside the couch with her knees drawn up, cradling her head. With a pang of something I couldn't understand I saw that her glasses were off, lying near her on the floor. They became alive to me; and somehow lost and suffering. I wanted to walk over to them; pick them up; put them back on Frannie where they belonged.

I did love her. I knew it then. But not the way she thought I did; and not the way she loved me. It wasn't I who had the dream confused with reality: it was she. Why had I let myself be snared by her sad delusions? Why had I responded so deeply to an illness that wasn't mine?

'Look, Frannie,' I said calmly, 'call up your Paige woman. Maybe she can do something. Call her, will you?'

'I don't want Paige,' she answered. 'Can't you understand? It's true about you: I don't know how it is, or

what it is, or why it is—but everything I've said about you is true. You're wrong; you're so wrong. You're wrong about a thousand things: you don't see it; you don't know it; you never have; and maybe you never will. And that kills me; that kills me more than anything. I want to tell you, and teach you, and make you be right. It's funny: I'm righter than you are; but I don't *want* to be! I'd gladly be wrong any day if it could make *you* right. So don't tell me to call Paige. Who is Paige to me? I don't love Paige; I love you. I don't want Paige. I'm sorry, Jo. I can't help it. I want you.'

The directness of the thing shot a chill through me. I got up and opened the door. 'I think I'd better go,' I said.

I went upstairs to get my overnight bag. While I was there I remembered something: the duplicate key to my apartment. I'd given it to her the week we'd fixed the place and had never thought to ask her for it.

Before leaving I went back into the den. 'Give me my key,' I said.

She got up and took it out of the side drawer of the desk. 'Why do you want it?' she asked, looking at it in her hand. 'You've got another, haven't you?'

'Just give it to me.'

'Do you think I'd—use it?' Her mouth twisted into a crooked smile. 'Really, Jo—there's decency even in perverts, you know.'

'I'm sorry,' I told her, 'but if you ever did come, it would be an—intrusion.'

'Do you know how funny that is?' she asked. '*You* being fussy about *intrusions*?'

'I'm sorry,' I said again. 'That just happens to be the way I feel. I don't want to; but I do.'

She handed it to me. 'How about your letters?' she asked. 'Would you like those too? You might want to use them someday—for a textbook on Normal Heterosexuality.'

I thought a minute. Then: 'Yes. I think it would be better if I had them. It can't matter; but I'd rather——'

She went up to Blair's room and got them from the valise.

'Here.'

I took them. There were twenty-one.

'Forgive my negligence,' she said. 'A tasteless rubber band. No blue ribbon. . . .'

I stuffed them into my bag as she watched me. '*You're really going,*' she said. It was not a question. It was a statement of fact, spoken only to force acceptance of its actuality; to clarify its emptiness of choice. When had I last verbalized the obvious to give myself the sense of what was real? Years and years ago, at my father's funeral. I had held together tightly through it all; but the truth was not the truth until the very end, when, seeing him lowered and away, I said, *You've really gone.*

She followed me out of the den into the living-room. I pushed at the screen door and it swung open. Standing in it, I looked around. 'What are you going to do?' I asked.

'I'm not sure,' she answered. 'At the moment I think I may—die. In any case, I wouldn't worry about it if I were you. What was it you said once—about Pam Coulton in Connecticut? You *casually inspect the universe*? It's all right with you what other people are? You haven't anything against it, but it has *nothing to do with you* . . .?'

When I got home there was a letter in my box from Gordon. It was short. California was beautiful, and he was selling Potter Pens a million a minute. He was staying on, as he'd told me he might. He missed me. When he came back he would give me a call. . . . 'I bought you a present,' the P.S. read. 'Silver ear-rings. I had them sent, and they should get to you soon. They're very modern—hammered out by the queerest queer in Hollywood—and three guesses what they look like! They're a little crazy. But so are you.'

I had hoped for something longer, less flip. But somehow it didn't seem to matter. It had occurred to me when he left that I might never see him again. He had almost seemed to want to get away.

And the ear-rings? They would come, of course. But would I wear them . . . ?

Why, I wondered; why, why, why had I never been able to read Walden?

Up in my room I lay down on the bed and fell asleep. It was dark when I awakened. The first thing I thought of was Frannie: for a minute I had the icy premonition (or was it a dream?) that she was dead.

I called her number. Marc answered.

'Is Frannie there?' I asked.

'Yes—but I don't think——'

'It's all right,' I told him. 'I don't want to talk to her. I just wanted to know if she was—*okay*.'

There was a pause. Then: 'If you mean did she kill herself, the answer is No—she did not.'

'Oh, Marc! Did she—tell you?'

Another pause; and finally: 'She didn't need to, Jo.'

'You mean—you knew?'

'Yes. I knew.'

'But how?'

'How *didn't* you?'

'How could I have?' I asked.

'Well,' he said, his voice dead-soft with anger, 'I should think you'd have got a pretty clear view of things from 'way up there, *on top*. . . .'

I smashed the phone down—too late: I had already heard the smash of his. I sat there with my hand on the cradled receiver and cried myself blind.

TWENTY•ONE

WELL, there isn't very much more to all of this. Gordon did come back, and he called me. I saw him a couple of times and we tried hard: but as Millay says: . . . *no such summer as the one before*. Something had gone out of it, though neither of us knew what. He wanted to talk about things: all things—even those that didn't need talking about. And pretty soon, in a kind of living-out of Frannie's prophecy, he became, for me, an eternal echo.

I kept on at Clarke for a few months more; and one evening I had dinner with one of the instructors. After that there were other evenings. He was tall and thin and when he played the piano it seemed a language of love. But he was married to a girl with a chronic lung condition and he felt that he could never leave her. Poor tortured guy—I wouldn't have adored him half as much if he had.

One day I was walking up Lexington and saw Bill Brecker. I waved to him and we stopped and talked. The weather was getting really cold, wasn't it? The new play at the Coronet was good and I ought to see it; he had just received a twenty-thousand-dollar grant 'to continue a research project on children; more and more he found

himself gravitating towards psychological factors: did I know, for instance, that when baby rats were removed from their mothers at birth, they were then, later, incapable of caring for their own young? Yes, yes: we must try to get together some time. But I knew we wouldn't. This was Bill; and when Bill made decisions he stuck by them. Bill had been given the brush; and Bill had made up his mind.

Another day I saw Pam Coulton. She was coming out of Bonwit's with a package under her arm. I wondered what was in it: *a robe*, I fantasied; *a pair of slacks*; *a cashmere sweater*; *something beautiful—for Foster*.

'Hi, Pam!' I called. 'Oh, Pam!' But she didn't hear me, and hurried on.

I thought of a line from Eliot: *I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. I do not think that they will sing to me*.

And then—the inevitable. Lunch hour, and rain. I scuttled around the corner of Fifty-fifth and Fifth and, like something out of an ancient slap-stick, ran head-on into Brad.

Stepping back, we looked at each other. He spoke first. 'You're wet,' he said.

'It's raining.'

He peered up, the drops glistening on his face and hair, and carefully examined the sky. 'I guess it is.'

I wanted to walk on, but I couldn't. 'How strange—to meet like this,' I said.

'Not strange,' he said. 'I've felt for months that you were just around each corner. I turn a lot of them every

day. The odds were in my favour.' He touched my elbow. 'Talk to me?'

'About what?' I asked; but I hadn't said no.

We went into the Gotham—the dark bar at the back, and sat down at a little table. I ordered a Scotch and soda.

'A Scotch and soda,' Brad told the waiter, 'and a lemonade.'

I didn't comment.

'Has it been long enough?' he asked, when the drinks had come. 'Have you found out yet?'

'Found out what?'

'That it won't work this way?'

'But it has,' I told him, trying to believe it. 'It has worked—for me.'

'Cheers,' he said, putting the cherry from his lemonade on my plate. 'It hasn't for me.'

We were quiet.

'I'm going away,' I said after a little while.

He seemed startled. 'Where?'

'Bermuda, maybe. For a month or so.'

'Can you swing it?'

'My mother sent me a cheque during the summer; and I've got something saved from my salary.'

'Why Bermuda?'

'I don't know.'

Then: 'Will you come back?'

'To New York? I doubt it. Or at least, not to stay. I've had it with New York, I think.'

'Will you come back to me?'

I looked up at the ceiling. 'I'd like a sandwich,' I said.

He didn't ask me what kind. 'A sandwich,' he told the waiter. 'Bacon, lettuce, and tomato; white toast; mayonnaise on the side. Nothing for me.'

The waiter left.

'I've already had lunch,' he explained. 'Scrambled eggs, rolls, coffee and cake. . . .' It was a footnote to the lemonade. It said: *I'm trying now. I'm eating. I'm not drinking much. Look at me. Notice this. Think about it. I'm trying.*

I wanted to put my hand on his. Instead, I asked him about his job.

'Still there,' he said. 'Hanging on. I don't know why they keep me.'

'I guess they like you.'

'They do,' he said. 'That's the funny thing about it. They do.'

I picked up the cherry and ate it; and then the sandwich came, with the mayonnaise on the side, and I began eating that. 'Why is it funny?' I asked. 'Why is it funny that people like you?'

'Did you ever think anybody ever liked me?'

I glanced up. He was eyeing me intently, but without anger.

I looked away.

He drank the lemonade slowly and we finished together.

When we got outside it wasn't raining any more. 'Can I walk you somewhere?' he asked.

'No.'

He put out his hand. I took it. In all the years I had known him, we had never shaken hands.

'When you get back,' he said, 'call me.'

'There's no reason to.'

'Yes, there is.'

I thought of the past. I remembered the other times: the partings and the comings-together; the tears and the

promises; the new beginnings, and the same old ends. 'Don't tell me,' I said. 'I've heard it before: you *need me!*'

He lifted my hand to his mouth and kissed the inner side of my wrist. Then he smiled. 'You've only got half of it, Jo,' he said as he turned to go. '*You need me.*'

I didn't see Frannie again. Somehow we managed to keep from meeting at the same parties—which wasn't strange: I had dropped out of her crowd as quickly as I'd dropped into it. But a week before I left I saw Jeri and Marian, lunching at Schrafft's.

Had I heard? they asked; the firm of Bendheim, Blatz, and Mendes-Cohen was now the firm of Bendheim, Blatz, Mendes-Cohen, and Browne. It had happened after the case Marc had handled—when he'd come back from Bermuda. And Frannie? Frannie was a new woman! The other day she'd made a batch of the most delicious French cookies anyone had ever eaten! And guess what—she was letting her hair grow. She was going to let it get real long and wear it up in a bun.

'Of course,' Marian put in, 'she'll end up looking ten years older!'

'So what,' said Jeri. 'It's what she *wants.*'

I walked away with an ache inside. In spite of all the rot that went on with Frannie and Marian and Jeri, they were still friends; yet, with all the love there had been between Frannie and me—we were not. *Hate isn't the worst thing in the world, you know . . .* she had once said. *Hate's even healthy—when it's honest.*

On my way back to the office I thought of the memo on the Lion House.

I guessed they would tell her they'd seen me; and that same week I got a letter from her. I didn't answer it. But when I packed to come down here I stuck it into a book and brought it along. I have it with me now; and here it is:

Dear Jo,

Don't rip it to bits before you've read it just because it comes from me.

I've thought of calling you, but haven't. I've been afraid you'd hang up—or maybe afraid you wouldn't.

You'd think we'd have met somewhere, if only on the street. I've asked about you from time to time. That's how I learned (from the Hermans, at a party) that you were planning a vacation in Bermuda, and that after, you were thinking of moving away for good. If that happens, I won't know where you are. So I'm writing to you now.

There are things to be said, even if they are to be last things. Slob that I've always been in some areas, I go hard for wind-ups and neat finishes.

The day you walked out of here was one of the most crucial of my life. It took hours to crawl back to any kind of endurance. But, managing that, somehow, I also managed to crawl my way into Helen Paige's office the following morning at nine o'clock. She's more booked-up than the Public Library; but I guess the way I put it to her on the phone, she knew it wasn't for laughs.

I've been seeing her five days a week since then. In time we'll knock it down to four, and then three; but, in toto, I'd sentence myself to a good four years. That, Jo, is how much there is to find out!

We began with you, of course. But I sense now, in the deep part of me, that it was a beginning which might really be considered an end. The true beginning began thirty-one

years ago; and each hour on that beat-up old couch of hers takes me further and further back to it.

If only I could tell you, even a little, what it's like, how it works, what it does! But I can't. You can read the facts in any decent book, and they would bore you. Strong, rejecting mother; weak, deserting father: ergo: double-barrelled shotgun, shooting hate, guilt, fear—in a vicious cycle of alternating orders. Well, it isn't quite that simple; but neither is it impossibly complex. And there are so many other similar case-structures cluttering up the world that I sometimes wonder where in hell I ever got the idea that I was so God-damned, gorgeously original!

The feelings are something else again; and those might bore you too—because they're mine, not yours.

If you're interested, fork up your own twenty-five-an-hour and see for yourself! I'm proselytizing, of course. Like all converts, I feel that nothing else exists, or ever will. It becomes your religion, and you believe that your couch is an Ark. Get on, you shout to everyone in sight, or you'll be drowned! (And I'm not completely kidding. I wish you would, Jo. I hope terribly much that some day you will. I would guess, though I have no right to, that you too are one of the Oedipus Wrecks!)

As for Paige—what can I tell you? Aside from her actual brilliance as an analyst, she strikes a thousand inner chords of response. I hate her till it kills me; and I love her till it kills me. But this time, I suspect, I am facing the kind of killing which turns back on itself and leads, ultimately, to life.

At the moment, I'm dying over something as seemingly unimportant as her clothes. Yours were bad enough, Jo—but hers are absolutely incredible! There are days when, I swear, she looks whorier than my own damned sex-box of a mother! I tell myself, however, that such deliberate unattractiveness can't possibly be blamed on poor taste

alone; that in reality she suffers from some deep and unresolved neurosis. . . .

Another problem is her deplorable lack of appreciation of wit. I told her my gag about Fee and Sympathy—and you could have heard a pin drop. I'm quite sure she couldn't respond because of some long-buried guilt about all the money I'm paying her, probably her mother didn't love her enough and she doesn't feel she deserves anything!

Last week I referred to her as my Psychoannihilist, and you could have heard half a pin drop. . . .

But I didn't really worry about her until two days ago. It was lovely out, and I went up to her office feeling, for the first time, as if I owned the world. 'I like this business,' I told her, lying happily on my back. 'And when I get all through I'm going to write a book about it. The story of my analysis. And you want to hear the title?—

I DISMEMBER MAMA!

Well, I waited. (After all, I was Ko-Ko in The Mikado at camp when I was thirteen, and I know: you have to pause for laughs. . . .) But this one never came. Finally I turned around and looked at her to see if maybe she had died or something. And you know what she was doing? She had put her knitting down (Oh, I forgot to tell you: she knits. Who she gives all those scarfs and socks and sweaters to, God only knows!) and she was staring blankly, but blankly, out of the window!

'Don't you think that's funny?' I asked.

And you know what she did then? She stopped looking out of the window and, without the merest bat of an eyelash, started knitting again!

Oh Jo, oh Jo, oh Jo—I'm plugging for yucks, and I know it! I'm kidding, and covering, and crapping it up; and I'm not telling you at all, at all what I wanted to tell you when I began this letter! Why can't I? Why is it so hard to be serious? What is it with the Pagliacci bit? What did we used to say when we were kids—Oh me, oh my!

It's better to laugh than cry . . .? Why is it better? I know. Because it's safer. You may not have to find out so much if you keep yourself rolling in the aisles.

But listen now, and I'll tell you what I wanted you to know: I'm all right. I mean I'm going to be all right. I'm sure of it. And one reason I'm sure of it is that I'm so damned fed up with not being all right.

So—there it is. I'm going to be okay. And that butterfly net I was always so afraid of—well, Paige isn't whamming it down over my head the way I thought she would. I've been living inside of it all my life, and Paige is lifting it off! And not just the big net; the little ones too. You know how your stocking can run while you're at a party and because of a crazy thing like that you think nobody loves you? Or you meet someone you met a year ago and he doesn't remember your name so you wish you were dead? Or you don't go to bed with the most wonderful guy in the world on the night he asks you because you suddenly realize you forgot to shave under your arms . . .?

Go get yours lifted, Jo. If you land a good job somewhere, save on dinners and clothes; save on everything, and do it! Don't not do it just because I tell you to. You know the old joke line—I may be crazy, but I'm not stupid. I've learned a lot in this short time: about me, about others. And what happened to us—well, you must know: it takes two to tango. Please go, will you?

*Love,
Frannie.*

P.S. I don't bite my nails any more.

Well, that's it. All of it. And I had to write it down to get rid of it; to get rid of Frannie. Or maybe I mean—to put her in her proper place. But I couldn't, at home. For

some reason—it had to be here in Bermuda, in just the house where Frannie was.

For eight weeks I've spent every morning typing at this table. My cigarette stubs have left a few scars beside the ones she left when she was here. In the afternoons I've swum in her blue ocean, and climbed her perilous cliffs to get close to her blue sky. At night, before I turn the lamp off, I see the top of the bedside cabinet, ringed with the glass-marks of her gins and soda. There are more there now that have come from mine.

When the whistle toots on the Hamilton Ferry, I think: *she loved the quaint and funny things; she must have found it charming.* When the insects with their flutes inside cut up the night in strips of music, I ask: *did she hear this? Did she keep the tune?* And when the seaplanes pass over the roof-top, beating my ears with a roar of lions, I wonder: *was she afraid?*

I'm leaving tomorrow. I'm flying back to New York to get my things. And then, I'm going to call Brad. I'm going to tell him he was right: *it doesn't work this way.*

What would Frannie say to that? What questions, what delvings into the hidden mind—to come forth with what irrefutable answers? *Dig up!* cries her credo. *Lift out and analyse! Take apart, spread open, examine! Why is the big thing; Why is all; without the Why there is no chance for being!*

It's strange. Having had so much of Frannie, I need her less and less. Her word is no longer law; and I can disagree.

She'll make it with Paige. If I know Frannie, she'll make it always, with anyone, at anything she sets her heart on. And the questioning is part of it, just as the answering is; just as the suffering is, and her own bright brand of laughter. In time, she'll make it with Paige—and she'll

leave that sacred couch with the biggest, most fully answered Why in the world, carrying it out in her hands, above her head, triumphantly, like a child on a beach with a coloured ball.

But that's she; not I. I don't ask the meaning of *every blade of grass, every pebble, every insignificant weed*. I walk on them as she does, and, as with her, they leave an imprint on my heel. Yet, I'm satisfied to have it there, willing to take it for what it is. *Why* it is, I don't know, don't wish to know, will never know.

Brad was right that day as he stood in front of the Gotham and kissed my wrist before going: until now, I've had only half of it. The rest of it is: *I need him*. In the beginning I wanted him, and everything that came with him. I got it. Then I let it go. Tomorrow I'm going back to get it. Whatever it is, it's something to be kept.

Does it add up? Does it make sense? God only knows. Living is a job for anyone; but anyone is free to choose the way to get it done.

Frannie is doing it her way.

Let me do it mine.